●谷川 流

兵庫県在住。2003年、第8回スニーカー大賞〈大賞〉を『涼宮ハルヒの憂鬱』で受賞し、デビューを果たす。また、電撃文庫より『学校を出よう！』『電撃!! イージス5』『絶望系閉じられた世界』の著作がある。趣味はバイクと麻雀。人生艱難辛苦中。今一番欲しいものはポジティブな思考と昔読んでまた再読したいと思ってるんだけどタイトルも作者名も思い出せない本を「それはこれだよ」と言って差し出してくれる人もしくは装置。

カバーイラスト／いとうのいぢ
カバーデザイン／中デザイン事務所

谷川 流

すずみやはるひのふんがい

涼宮ハルヒの憤慨

角川スニーカー文庫

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谷川 流

涼宮ハルヒの憤慨

角川スニーカー文庫

The Indignation of Suzumiya Haruhi

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Translated by: Baka-Tsuki

Editor in Chief★Straight Ahead!

“Rejected.”

Haruhi said flatly, thrusting the manuscript back.

“It’s no goo~d?”

Asahina-san raised her voice to a near-scream,

“But I really, really thought about it……”

“Yup, no good. Totally. It doesn’t strike any chords.”

Leaning back on the chief’s desk, Haruhi took the pen that had been on her ear into her hand and continued,

“First, this introduction is too common. ‘Long, long ago, in a certain place……’ whatever; that’s such a stale and ordinary way to start a story. Give it a little more twist. The beginning part should go for the catch, okay? First impressions are crucial.”

“But,”

Asahina-san nervously said,

“I thought that was how fairy tales are……”

“That mindset is obsolete!”

Haruhi handed out the rejection with a thoroughly self-important air.

“The transformation of ideas is necessary. If you remember hearing this or that somewhere, think about the opposite first. Then you might just give birth to something new.”

This feeling like we were rapidly straying from the point was the result of Haruhi’s thought system. It’s not like the pick-off motion of a pitcher that let a fast runner get on first base, and I don’t think it’ll be good if you just do the opposite, either.

“Anyway, this is rejected.”

After making it a point to write “retake” over the copy paper of the manuscript with a red pen, she lightly tossed it into a cardboard box beside her desk. Within the box that had been originally loaded with oranges now was a mountain of wastepaper she had decided to send to the incinerator.

“Write something new.”

沒ハヌ
キャ。

“Woo…”

With shoulders drooped, Asahina-san dejectedly returned to her seat. She was just too pitiable. The sight of her gripping her pencil, arms wrapped around her head, brings out burning compassion and sympathy.

On a whim, my eyes shifted to the perfectly nondescript corner of the table, and there was, precious for this clubroom’s scenery, the figure of Nagato-not-reading.

“……”

Though it was Nagato keeping silently frozen as she stared at the notebook computer’s display, touching the keyboard and entering something, freezing up again, and then hitting keys with a tap-tap. So, she’s become an ornament again.

What Nagato was using was a notebook computer we had taken from the Computer Club as a prize for a game competition. Incidentally, similar things were in front of Koizumi and me, and with nothing much to think about, the CPU cooling fan was already spinning noisily to cool its brain down. The sight of Koizumi’s fingers moving rhythmically and the sounds as he punched keys annoyed me like hell. So he’s settled on what he was going to write, isn’t that nice.

Although Asahina-san, who had shown such a silly prejudice against machines, had been writing on copy paper by herself, she now came to a complete stop as if she had synchronized with me.

Ah yeah. Even though I have nothing to write, should I be typing something?

“Okay, all of you as well!”

Haruhi alone was abnormally cheerful.

“Hurry up and hand in your manuscripts, if we don’t start the editing, we won’t make it in time for publication! Get into gear! You can write quickly if you just give it a little thought, can’t you? Because you’re not making an entry for a literary prize in long story writing or anything.”

From Haruhi’s cheery face bloomed a self-confidence that had sprung from somewhere I didn’t know, as usual. She seemed like she was going to strike her prey at any moment.

“Kyon, you aren’t moving your hands at all! Just glaring at the computer screen like that won’t make your article! Anyway, write something first, then print it and show it to me, and if I think it’s amusing then it passes, and if I don’t then it’s rejected, okay?”

My sympathy for Asahina-san transformed into self-pity. Why do I have to do such a thing? Not just me, but Asahina-san, who was moaning beside me, and even Koizumi, who was facing me while smiling; shouldn’t the few of us be raising the signal to mutiny?

Well, even though SOS Brigade Chief Suzumiya Haruhi's special characteristic was not listening to what you were saying, why was she willfully getting into a role like this?

My eyes moved from Haruhi's itching-to-slap-people's-manuscripts-down-the-cardboard-box smile, to the armband on her arm.

On the armband that was usually labeled Brigade Chief, and formerly Great Detective and Ultra-Director, a new title was written in big letters with a magic marker.

This time, it was "Editor-in-Chief."

The beginning goes back a few days.

It was a day in the third school term, and the footsteps of the end of the year were gradually hitting my ears. I wish there could've been a little warning at least, but it had come out of nowhere on a lunch break that should've been peaceful.

"Summons."

The one who said that was Nagato Yuki. Beside her, for some reason, was Koizumi Itsuki's slender form. I've never even had a micron of a feeling that this pair would be coming side-by-side to my classroom, and although it was I who had taken a break from digging through my *bento* to come to the corridor, I just wanted to hurry up and return to my own desk.

"What's that about a summons?"

I could only think of my current situation. After Taniguchi, who had just returned from buying and was carrying a variety of breads and a melon sour drink, said "Kyon, your companions are here," I went out and there were these two standing around. Though it was an unexpected pairing, I couldn't think of any partner that would be suitable for Nagato to be acting as a couple with.

I took in the sight of the alien girl who had been expressionlessly standing there after stating that single mysterious word at the beginning, gave up after waiting for three seconds, and looked at Koizumi's handsome face.

"Care to explain?"

"Of course, that's what I came here for."

Koizumi craned his neck into classroom five and inquired,

"Suzumiya-san won't be returning anytime soon?"

She had rushed out right after the fourth period ended. She should be munching away at a table in the cafeteria right about now.

“That’s convenient. I’d rather this doesn’t reach her ears.”

I have a feeling that I wouldn’t want this news to reach my ears as well.

“That’s true.”

Koizumi’s voice was lowered in a serious tone. In comparison, you seem like you’re happy.

“Well, it’s up to the person whether or not it’s something to be happy about.”

“Hurry up and say it, already.”

“An official writ came down from the President of the Student Council. It’s an order to appear at the Student Council room after school today. In short, it is a summons.”

Aha.

I understood in an instant.

“It finally came?”

A summons from the President of the Student Council――――it’s not that I didn’t know my own place that I would think of asking “What for?” In this one year, the SOS Brigade has, regardless of whether it was inside the school or outside, raised up a storm, as I, being too much of a good person, feigned ignorance to its misdeeds. What do we have first? The case of the computers that were hauled from the Computer Club? No, that should’ve been settled by the game showdown at autumn last year. As I hear it, the President of the Computer Club had unconditionally withdrawn the complaint they had filed at the Student Council after their defeat.

Was it because of that nonsensical film? That was done quite some time ago, and the Student Council must have had elections after the school festival. Did the current President remember the tasks that the previous President had left for him just now? Or could our personal descriptions have just recently arrived at North High from the neighboring shrines that we had rounded? We visited too many temples here and there for the start of the New Year.

“There’s no helping it.”

I shrugged, gazing at the absentee chief’s desk, the rearmost one by the windows.

“Haruhi would be really happy to go off at the President. Depending on the other side’s attitude, this just might turn into a brawl. As Koizumi is the mediator, I’ll leave it up to you.”

“You are mistaken.”

Koizumi denied eloquently.

“The one being summoned is not Suzumiya-san.”

So is it me? Come off it, that doesn’t make any sense. Just because Haruhi has so much resiliency that it’s like a spring made of whale whiskers, it would be at the height of injustice if I, still just hearing about it, had to bear the full brunt of it all. Though I know that the Student Council is just the school’s radio-controlled puppet, I can’t help but be disappointed that they’d go so far as acting like cowards.

“No, it isn’t you, either.”

Looking happy for some reason, Koizumi was getting increasingly invigorated as he said,

“The one being summoned, is Nagato-san alone.”

Say what? Isn’t this just getting more and more absurd? Although she’d make a competent lecturee as she quietly listens to whatever you say, there won’t be any sense of accomplishment since there’s little doubt that she will just stick to her silence.

“To Nagato? The Student Council President?”

“Your object and subject are correct. That’s right, the President has designated Nagato-san.”

Nagato’s face showed no thoughts for herself as she stood there distantly. When she got hit by the beam of surprise that fired from my eyes, her bangs just gave a little sway.

“What do you mean? What business could the President of the Student Council have with Nagato? It can’t be that he wants to employ her as secretary of the Student Council?”

“They already have a secretary, so that’s wrong, of course.”

Just say it already. Do you speak in that arrogant way because the nature is carved into your DNA?

“Forgive me. Now then, I shall tell you what I know. The reason why Nagato-san was summoned is simple. Aside from an interview about the Literature Club’s activities, it is for discussing the question of the club’s future continuation.”

“Literature Club? But what――”

I was about to ask what the relation was, but I caught on to his lines.

“……”

Nagato was gazing at end of the corridor without moving.

The white face that once wore glasses was as outwardly silent as that time. I still can't forget when she slowly raised her expressionless face in the clubroom where Haruhi had jumped into as she dragged me along.

"I see, the Literature Club, huh. So that's how it is."

This must be about how the SOS Brigade has been holding the Literature Club room as its headquarters for a while now. The only official member of the Literature Club has been Nagato from the beginning, while we were merely freeloaders, or some otherwise illegal occupants. Haruhi probably thinks that we had long ago acquired the rights to the place, but the Student Council will surely assert a different universal and standard opinion.

Koizumi probably read my expression and said,

"The memo was for the President to be able to have a talk personally after school. It came to me first. Then I passed it on to Nagato-san."

Why did it go to you?

"Because it would probably be ignored if it were addressed to Nagato, don't you think?"

On the other hand, you have as little to do with Literature Club activities as me.

"That may be, but it isn't as simple as you say. Things could get very difficult. Since we're not members and we've done nothing even closely related to literature in the Literature Club room, it wouldn't be surprising if it weren't just the Student Council that feels suspicious…… No, it's already become common knowledge, so I should say that it's been overlooked until now."

Koizumi, who had spoken sensibly, wore a smile that made me wonder whose side he was on.

They may be accusing me of being one of the leaders, but why has it come now? Like a lazy landlord who doesn't repair a leaky roof, hasn't the Student Council been leniently ignoring the SOS brigade as well?

"The Student Council from before was like that. However, the current President seems to be more complicated."

Koizumi smiled, showing his white teeth, and glanced at Nagato from the side.

As expected, Nagato gave no reaction, and just moved her eyes from the end of the corridor and focused them on my feet. It somehow seemed like she was saying sorry for the trouble.

And of course, Nagato has never given me any problems. It's been decided. As far as I know, there is only one person who scatters trouble into the air whenever she moves. These messes have――――.

I said, exhaling into the empty air.

“Always been brought about by Haruhi.”

Since the day she had shouted that “This club room is our club room from now on!”

“Please keep this a secret from Suzumiya-san.”

Koizumi said.

“Because I think it will only make things worse. So after school, please go to the Student Council room so she doesn’t find out.”

“Yeah, I got it.” I was about to say, before I barely caught on.

“Wait a sec. Why do I have to be the one to go? I’m not a person that gets carried away so easily that I would thoughtlessly march over there even though I wasn’t invited.”

Of course, if Nagato had wished for me to accompany her I would have been happy to go, but Koizumi has no business asking me. Besides, wouldn’t the other party be terrified if Nagato came alone, I thought.

“The other side is well informed. That’s why I was appointed as the messenger. Though I could go on and act as Nagato-san’s representative altogether, I’m worried that there might be some trouble later, as being an agent isn’t part of my job. Well anyway, to put it simply, you are Suzumiya-san’s representative.”

“Can’t Haruhi go, herself?”

“Do you really mean that?”

Koizumi popped his eyes in an exaggerated manner.

I snorted in response to his bad acting. If you say you understand it, then even I can understand it. If a bomb-girl like that is thrown at the Student Council, I don’t think it will end with a simple explosion. Considering the concern she had shown for Nagato at the winter lodge, if she found out that a summons had come for Nagato from the Student Council――she’d fly off just at the “for Nagato from the Student Council” part, she won’t just smash the door as she charged to the Student Council room, she might even push ahead and attack the staff room or the principal’s office by mistake. Though that might make her feel better, it will undoubtedly be me whose stomach is hurting later. Unlike Koizumi, I don’t want to change schools without any personal reasons.

“Well then, let’s do our best.”

Koizumi had known my answer from the start, and let loose a smile as he said,

“I’ll tell the President. Let’s meet at the President’s room after school.”

Though he showed attitude while Haruhi was away, Koizumi lightly moved his long legs as he went away from classroom five. Afterwards, while watching Nagato walk away to follow him until I could no longer see her small figure, I really felt that the end of our one year had begun.

Whatever has been said, perhaps Koizumi and Nagato were completely content with the SOS Brigade’s reputation. While acting as a group, the number of things we were keeping from Haruhi was increasing on a monthly basis…….

No need to get sentimental.

Thanks to that, I didn’t get to ask Koizumi why he was going on normally as the Student Council President’s carrier pigeon.

By the way, with Haruhi’s superb perception, she had noticed my suspicious behavior————though she was totally unaware————by the break after the fifth period.

A sharp object had been insistently poking my back, and when I turned to look at the seat behind me,

“What are you being so restless about?”

Haruhi said as she twirled a mechanical pencil in her fingertips,

“You look like you’ve been called out by someone.”

For such a time, I had planned something that one-hundred-percent cannot be found false.

“Yeah, Okabe asked me to see him. He specifically told me to come during the lunch break.”

I answered with a nonchalant look.

“It seems to be a request to talk about my grades. Depending on the results of my end of term exams, they may even arrange to notify my parents. About how I should reform myself right now if I’m thinking about going on to university or something.”

Though I don’t have enough heart and all that to reform myself, and I cannot change what isn’t there, what I say isn’t always utter nonsense. Taniguchi had said something that sounded roughly the same but with different words, and the conclusion I got from the information sharing was that our homeroom teacher was worried about one of his students’ future and that he was a teacher for whom a fraction of sympathy was enough.

But then, because I'm near someone like Taniguchi, who's so easygoing that even I just go along thinking it's okay, the feeling of tension is diluted. I sometimes think that Kunikida maintaining decent grades was stranger.

"Eh?"

While Haruhi propped her elbows on her desk and rested her chin in her hands,

"It's suspicious that you would get such grades. And I thought you were listening in class as diligently as me."

She said, and gazed outside the window. The briskness of the streaming clouds showed the strength of the wind.

I don't want to be lumped in with your brain. The occupant of my head has nothing to do with space-time distortions, information explosions, or that damned grey space. Compared to Haruhi's unprecedented variety, it is about as cute as a miniature dachshund.

"Listening without understanding is nothing but a waste of time."

I said instead. Though I said it without any confidence.

"Hmm?"

With Haruhi's eyes still fixed on the scenery outside, she said to the windowpane,

"If you like, I could help you with your studies. I won't mind, we'd just be repeating the lessons anyway, and if it's World Leaders, I'm confident that you'll get more from my teaching method than class."

"They suck, those people," Haruhi muttered to herself, then gave me a glance before quickly looking away.

While I thought about how I should answer,

"Also, Mikuru-chan has been flapping about, too, hasn't she? This school, although it's prefectural and gives a strange impression, acts like a college preparatory school, so this season is hard on the second years as well. They're real busy with special classes, trial exams, and all that. And the school trip was nothing but a complete disaster. If that was the case, they should just have the trip sometime within the year. They'll just have to have the school festival in spring instead of autumn. Don't you think?"

She spoke briskly, then appeared to be watching the streaming clouds again. It seemed like she was waiting for my answer, so I said,

"Yeah."

I went along and watched the clouds as well.

“I just want to go on to the next year safely.”

If, by chance, I do get held back a year,

“Hiya, Suzumiya-senpai.”

“Ah, stupid Kyon, go buy me a sanshoku bread. I’ll pay you later.”

Resentfully, it ended up like one of our ordinary clubroom conversations. I can avoid the penalty if I could make Haruhi prepare a question guide for the term exams. Wait, it would also be good to add Nagato to the manufacturing staff. I believe we can sell the end-product at five hundred yen per copy. We could make a small fortune. My fellow failure Taniguchi can buy one with a thirty percent special service discount.

“That won’t do.”

Haruhi dismissed my profitable proposal.

“You won’t really learn anything that way. That’s just a short-term thing. You’d go all panicky if the questions were just a little off. If you don’t build up your knowledge by getting a perfect understanding of things, you’ll just end up being tricked by some bad folks. Well, relax. If you seriously keep at it for half a year, even you can be in Kunikida’s level.”

You don’t need to be that fired up about it. An image comes to mind of Haruhi all-too happily letting me have it with a “Wrong! Why can’t you understand such a simple thing? Stupid, stupid, stupid!” through a megaphone every time I bring up an answer that I’ve figured out as I sweated nervously, and while I was telling myself not to picture such a scene,

“Just ask me about the things you don’t understand and I’ll teach you. The rest will take care of itself, somehow.”

“If it’ll just happen somehow, then why hasn’t it happened already?”

Did I just say such an irritating thing out loud? Yes, I sure did.

“Why do you have to be so stubborn?”

Haruhi turned to the front with lips that seemed like they were about to explode, and boldly thrust her chest forward.

“Because I won’t allow a scandal such as a dropout coming from my SOS Brigade to happen. If it does, the Student Council or whatever might go ‘Oh, look at this!’ and come forward with a complaint. That’s why, so you don’t miss this chance, you must motivate yourself even just a little. Got it?”

After spitting out such unusually sharp lines with a dexterous expression of frowned eyebrows and a smiling mouth, Haruhi kept scowling at me and frowned until I expressed agreement with her demand.

The end of the school day had come.

Having left the classroom, I acted like I was heading off to the staff room and parted with Haruhi, then went directly to the Student Council room. Since it was right beside the staff room, there would be no need to make a detour to hide my destination, and I should arrive without any problems.

Even so, when it comes down to it, some feeling of tension was still coursing through my body.

I had no idea what sort of face the Student Council President had, even though I had seen him somewhat during the Student Council elections after the school festival. Now that I think about it, though I remember hearing every candidate's speech in the auditorium, as a perfectly non-affiliated voter, I wrote down the most ordinary name on the ballot, and promptly forgot about it. Just what kind of guy became president? In any event, I'm sure it's a sophomore, since someone you call President is probably a higher year student. Someone with more dignity than the Computer Club's President, I'd think.

While I was hesitating in front of the Student Council for a moment,

"Oh, Kyon-kun! Whacha doing?"

Coming out of the staff room, a long-haired lady had bumped into me. It was Asahina-san's classmate and honorary consultant of the SOS Brigade, which made it subsequently clear that she was no ordinary second year girl.

Even if she has to raise her head to somebody, this person would still make him fall.

"Hiya."

At my varsity group-level enthusiastic greeting, she went,

"A-haha! Hiee!"

Tsuruya-san raised a hand with a hyper-looking smile, and fixed her eyes on the door I was standing next to,

"What have we here! You have some business with the Student Council?"

I went to this place just to hear what this business is. That doesn't mean I have something to do at the Student Council.

“E-heh?”

Tsuruya-san, who approached in that vigorous way of walking that closely resembled Haruhi’s, drew her mouth close to my ear as I teetered backwards. She then said in voice that was quiet for her,

“Hmm? By any chance, are you spying on the Student Council?”

Tsuruya-san’s face was in point-blank range, like some serious spies were listening in. This person, who is unforgettable for her cheerful giggles no matter what was happening, wore an expression that I could not recognize on her. For some reason or other, I felt that it was necessary to give an explanation.

“Umm, well, you see……”

What can I say, Tsuruya-san. If I were a spy following somebody’s secret order, I shouldn’t be getting into such trouble right now.

“That’s true.”

Tsuruya-san stuck out her tongue,

“Yeah, sorry for being suspicious. I just happened to hear some things. There are rumors of mysterious people creeping around the dark side of the Student Council, working in the shadows, didn’t you know? It also seems like many things happened after the presidential election before. Sounds like a bunch of lies, don’t you think?”

First time I’ve heard of it. It’s hard to imagine that a shabby prefectural high school’s elections for President of the Student Council would have such things happening behind the scenes, so it’s all probably a false rumor. Though Haruhi would love it if there really were such a conspiracy story on our campus.

“Tsuruya-san.”

It was my turn to ask her. There were things I didn’t know that were probably already well-known to her.

“Do you know what kind of person the President is?”

Though I had wished she could tell me something about the guy,

“I don’t know much, myself. We’re not in the same class. He’s an arrogant but good guy, and he seems to have a pretty sharp head on his shoulders. If you talk about the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, he gives an impression similar to Shiba Yi. It looks like the slogan he proclaimed was for the improvement of student independence. The previous Student Council had just seemed like hishimochi-in-the-sky.”

It bothered me that I couldn't immediately picture his real character even with the comparison to a famous historical figure, and I was suspicious about whether her *mochi*-metaphor was accurate or not.

"Anyway, why were you at the staff room, Tsuruya-san?"

"Hm? I'm on day-duty today. I came here to deliver the daily reports."

After answering casually, Tsuruya-san patted me on the shoulder and said in a big voice,

"Kyon-kun, keep up the good work! If you get into a fight with the Student Council, I'll give you a hand! And Haru-nyan and the others are all on your side, of course!"

That's really encouraging. However, I don't want it to go that far. I wonder what kinds of tricks Haruhi, who'd be ecstatic at discovering a formidable enemy, will employ; just thinking about it is wearing out my brain. I already feel like thinking of something else.

"Laters", Tsuruya-san waved, having finished saying all that she had wanted to say, and departed briskly.

Like always, this person gets to the point even without saying anything. She is a match for Haruhi when it comes to the power of conceptualization. She's probably the only student in North High who could form a combination with Haruhi and show comparable power. Where she differs from our troublesome brigade chief is that she hasn't completely left behind all common sense.

However, judging from the thinness of the wall and the door, I can't help but think that Tsuruya-san's last shout must've passed right on through to the inside. Haruhi-like behavior must be lying dormant within her somewhere.

Well, I can't just go changing my mind now.

To avoid any adverse effects, I knocked politely first.

"You may enter."

The voice resounded abruptly from inside. You may enter; so there really people who speak like that among the high school students. And it was such a cool voice that it could be used to dub a veteran actor in a foreign movie.

I opened the sliding door, and my body was plunged into the Student Council room for the first time in my life.

Although the Student Council room boasts a somewhat wider area than the Literature Club room, it wasn't very different from any other clubroom in the old shack. Without an exclusive desk

where a triangular pyramid with something like “President” written on it was placed, it looked bare compared to our clubroom. It would be simpler to just call it a meeting room.

Koizumi, who had arrived before me, gave me a greeting,

“Thank you. It’s good that you could come.”

Standing by the entrance, and lined up with Koizumi like she was also waiting for me, was Nagato.

“……”

Nagato sagely darted her eyes to the windows, and before them was the President.

The President…… huh.

He was a tall student, I realized. He was looking outside the windows for some reason, and he was unmoving as he held his hands together at his back. The setting sun coming in from the south-facing window served as backlighting, making his form ambiguous.

There was another person; this one a shadow sitting in a corner of the long table. It was a female student, her face hidden as she opened a notebook, looking like she was getting ready to take down the minutes with the mechanical pencil in her hand. It seems like this person is the secretary.

The President still hasn’t moved much. What could be so interesting about the scenery outside; the tennis court and the empty pool shouldn’t be visible, but the profound silence stretched on.

“Mister President.”

After a moderate pause, Koizumi called out in his much-too exhilarated voice.

“All the people you have invited are now gathered here. Please proceed with your business.”

“Very well.”

The President turned around slowly, and I was finally able to assess his face. He was an exceptionally slender, glasses-wearing second year student. Though it was in a different way from Koizumi’s budget-idol face, he was a pretty handsome bastard. It seemed like all of his thoughts were focused on a desire for improvement; there was a cold-blooded look in his eyes that made one think of a young career person, and I reflexively thought that he was not here to make any friends.

Expressionless, though in a different way from Nagato, he continued,

“Though I think you may already have heard from Koizumi, I will say it once more. I wanted you all to come here. Regarding the Literature Club’s activities, the Student Council is giving its final notice.”

Final, how? Has there ever been any sort of notice until this moment? Even if there were, it seems Nagato hasn’t been complying meekly to your invitations, which is the reason we were able to make the clubroom our home base.

“……”

Nagato was without any reaction or concern as the President coldly spoke.

“Currently, you have been reduced to being a Literature Club in name only. Do you agree?”

She’s no good except for reading quietly in the clubroom, as I thought.

“……”

Nagato was silent.

“You are already at a level of not even functioning as a club.”

“……”

Nagato looked mutedly at the President.

“I will state it clearly. We, the Student Council, cannot see any reason for the current Literature Club’s existence. These are the findings of our continuous all-aspect investigation.”

“……”

Nagato was keeping still.

“Therefore, we are announcing the indefinite suspension of the Literature Club. You are to promptly vacate your clubroom.”

“……”

Nagato was quiet all the same. Though I knew why.

“You are Nagato-kun, huh.”

As the President coolly caught the unyielding Nagato’s eyes,

“You leave non-members in your clubroom, and neglect your duties by doing nothing about it. Besides that, what have you been doing with the Literature Club’s allotted activity budget this

year? Are you saying that the filming of that movie was an activity of the Literature Club? According to our investigation, the credits for that movie in question said that it was produced by an illegal group, the SOS Brigade; there was no mention of the Literature Club's name anywhere. And generally speaking, the film itself was made without the permission of the school festival's executive committee."

It pains me to hear you say that. Koizumi and Nagato may have willed it to stop right from the start, but ending Haruhi's tyranny was my sworn duty. All for the sake of Asahina-san, who had been made the heroine by force.

"……"

You couldn't tell what Nagato was thinking to herself from her profile. Though that's just an amateur's observation.

Either the President is misunderstanding her non-reaction as a sign of obedience, or he is just not shaking off his arrogant manner.

"Tentatively, as a step in the Literature Club's suspension, you will be prohibited from entering the clubroom until new members join in the next school year. Are there any objections? If you do, you should speak up. I'm all ears."

"……"

Though not even a hair on Nagato was moving, if it were Haruhi, Asahina-san, and Koizumi, they might've understood. And, if my colleagues could understand it, then it would already be obvious even to me. I know that much from the atmosphere.

"……"

Nagato, who had sunk into silence,

"……"

She seemed to be quietly angry.

"Hm. No objections, then?"

The President moved the tips of his lips in disgust. Though there was no change in his cool expression itself,

"In the Literature Club, Nagato-kun, there are no members other than you. You are the de facto head. If you would consent, for the preservation of the clubroom we will start the immediate removal of all foreign objects by taking out all items unrelated to club activities and disposing of them, or having them stored here. Retrieve the personal effects that you have left there at once."

“Wait a sec.”

I interrupted the President’s one-sided declaration. Before Nagato’s silent anger reaches the critical point,

“Saying that all of a sudden is too much. Neglecting us until now, and then springing this on us without any warning isn’t fair.”

“You, of all people, should say that.”

The President poured a cold look on me, going “Heh” with his lips in an annoying smile.

“I had the club establishment application you’ve submitted shown to me. It was so bad, it was funny. If we approved every association that gave such random details, this school would see no end of it.”

That despicable, smart-ass upper classman pushed up his glasses in a dramatic gesture,

“You should study your words some more. You, especially, should be working on your studies in general. I don’t think your grades are good enough that you can play around after school doing nothing.”

Just as I thought. The President has been planning to scrap the SOS Brigade from the beginning. That stuff about the Literature Club was a simple ruse. At least Haruhi the ultra-director wrote Nagato into a scenario that was somewhat excusable.

“Saying that you will join the Literature Club is useless now.”

The President said, forestalling me even though I haven’t even thought of it.

“Look. For argument’s sake, even if you could pass the year as official Literature Club members, you couldn’t do even one thing that can be recognized as a Literature Club activity. Just what would you do?”

The President’s glasses were flashing for no reason. Are those special effects?

“We may have appeared tolerant. You were talking about the SOS Brigade? It was formed without authorization, and utterly does whatever it pleases. Not only did you light fireworks on the rooftop, you threatened teachers, loitered on campus in lascivious clothing, inexcusably cooked Nabe within a fire-prohibited building, and just been a big problem otherwise. Just who do you think you people are?”

I knew that what he was saying was generally correct. It was certainly bad. But I think they still should’ve conferred with us to get a single word in at least. I don’t think they’d approve no matter what I would have answered, but I just can’t go with whatever they say.

“You have a dirty mouth.”

I was taking Nagato’s fury for my own,

“If that’s how it is, then you should have called out Haruhi and talked to her directly. Why’d you summon Nagato if you were just going to shut down the Literature Club?”

However, my counterattack seemed to have finished earlier than I had estimated.

“Of course.”

The President was not shaken at all. Rearranging his arms to look cool, with an expression like that of an elite section chief who had just finished reading a written review plan submitted by a blundering subordinate, he continued,

“Because there is no such thing as an SOS Brigade within this school. Am I mistaken?”

Has it really come to this, I thought.

No matter how much the Student Council or the executive office had persisted, they couldn’t take down the SOS Brigade. Because, on paper, such a brigade could not exist in this school. That’s about as true as saying that losing more of what you don’t have is like how anything multiplied by zero becomes zero. Fumble around and it won’t be limited to just not getting the result of multiplying a negative by a negative; if you poke the girl called Suzumiya Haruhi the wrong way, you won’t know where she’d fly off to.

Like aiming at a split with a hooking ball and crushing the ten pins in the neighboring lane, her personality was unreadable.

Even if you attack her with a straight ball, she’s just going to smash a high-speed foul into your team’s dugout; doing so is just useless, and as for the Student Council and their conclusions, they were probably filling up a moat when they had drawn up that plan first.

Specifically, that the SOS Brigade has been illegally residing in the clubroom section on the third floor of the Old Shack, which was the Literature Club’s clubroom.

If the Literature Club is forfeited and gets downgraded, the SOS Brigade’s site will automatically disappear as well. We could only stay there regularly because Nagato, the one-and-only Literature Club member, had said “Okay,” though perhaps no human being other than Nagato would’ve replied so when asked to “Lend me your clubroom.”

If the Literature Club is terminated, as it is, Nagato would no longer be a Literature Club member, and the room where she could quietly read books everyday would disappear, and the five of us would lose the place where we could gather together after school.

What an excellent strategy. I would commend it. The bad thing is, because of what we had done, Nagato gets the roles of both the victim who gets the short end of the stick, as well as a co-conspirator.

What's difficult with the situation on this side is that even I know that a counter-argument cannot be constructed; at the very least, the one to wave that flag would be Haruhi, and though I have to question whether the President realizes it, it's perfectly clear that a Nagato-call was folded within.

So Nagato must be reaching her limit as well.

"……"

The silent pressure building up within this petite figure in a sailor uniform was well known to me. Just what would happen if she were to release all that. Although the world would by no means be reconstructed, perhaps she could fly off with the President's memory and turn him into a puppet. Or perhaps, like Asakura, she could manipulate data and change this clubroom and the President along with it into something different. The memory of how Nagato Yuki went wild, during that game war versus the Computer Club last fall, came back to me forcefully.

As the Student Council President moved away and posed with his back to the setting sun, I was nervously wondering whether I should tell him what it really was,

"……"

And while the invisible, pregnant atmosphere kept silent, it disappeared.

"Hm?"

The crystalline aura (at least it felt like it) that was emanating from Nagato was disappearing like a lie. By chance, when I had looked at Nagato's face, her unblinking gaze was directed at someone other than the President.

I turned to look as well.

The female student, who was looking down at the meeting minutes as she moved her pen, and whom I had guessed was a second year girl acting as the secretary, slowly lifted her face.

"……Eh?"

That stupid sounding voice was mine.

Why was this person here? Her name didn't immediately come back to me…… ah, I remembered. It was summer. There was a strange incident a short while after the end of Tanabata.

And then, though I had not forgotten what I had seen, I'd rather say that with that meaningless incident…….

"Is anything the matter?"

The President said in a voice that was all business,

"Ah, I haven't introduced you. She is my Student Council's top executive, and is acting as our secretary――――"

The female student's hair moved lightly as she took a silent bow.

"This is Kimidori Emiri-kun."

The giant *kamadouma* came back to my mind with thunderous sound effects.

"Kimidori-san?"

Starting from the SOS Brigade website's abnormality, a problem consultation about the Computer Club President going AWOL led us to an alternate space, and though she was one of the people caught up in those debilitating events within that chain of stupidity, she was pretending not to recognize us at all as she set herself in a corner of the Student Council.

Kimidori-san gave a gentle smile, and her eyes met mine before she swung them over to Nagato. Their eyes appeared to thin a little. Adding to that, it seemed like they were even giving each other looks. And even more, it looked like Nagato gave a small, reluctant nod.

What? Was there some kind of telepathy going on between these two?

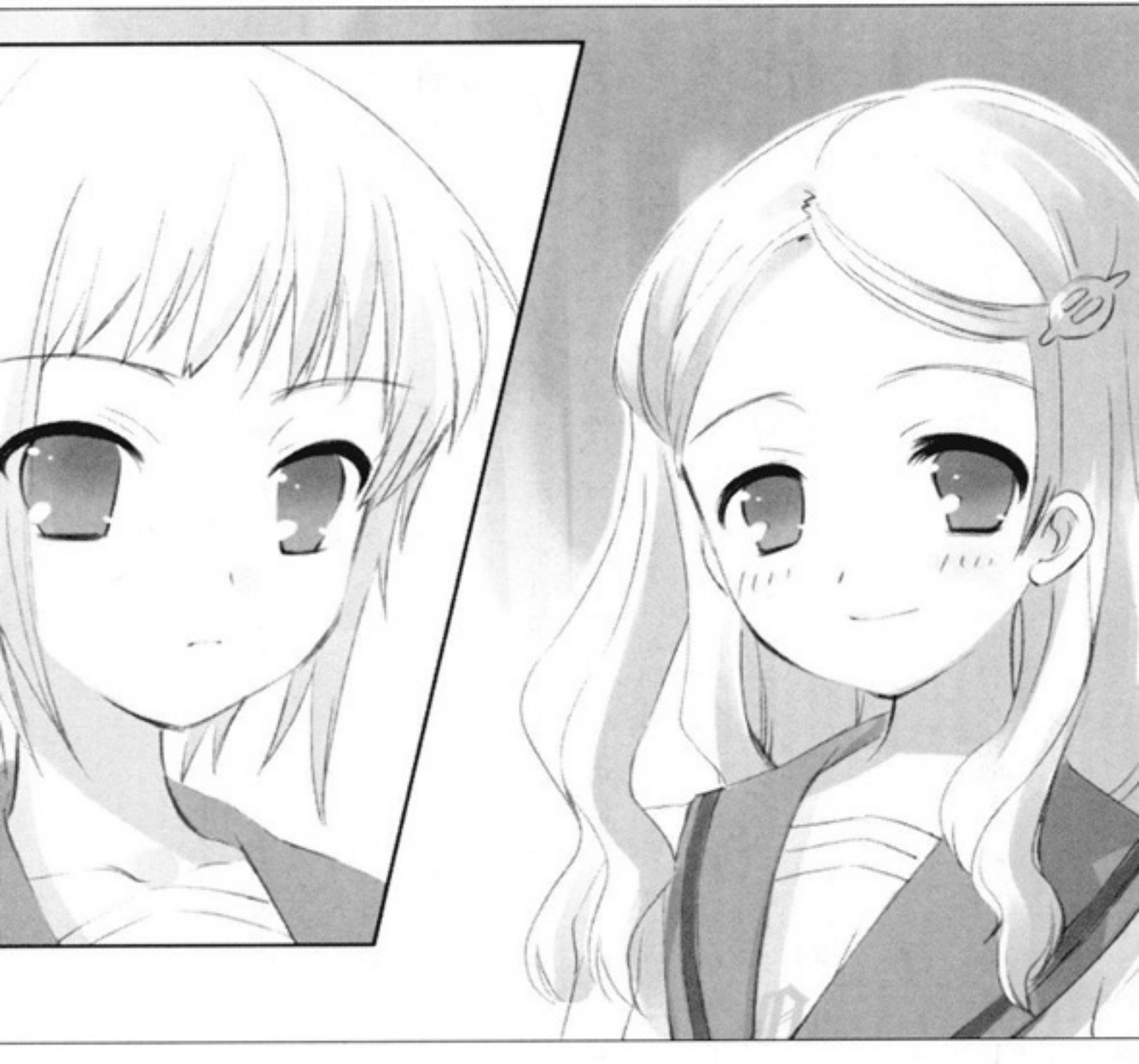
Now that I think about it, that incident was even stranger than I had considered. Though she had said she was the Computer Club President's girlfriend, I later learned from the guy himself that he didn't have one. Well, although Kimidori-san had come to the SOS Brigade for a consultation for some reason, I felt certain that Nagato had known. However, for them to stare each other down after happening to meet in this place, I can't think that this was just a coincidence.

Like a Partisan Boy Soldier hearing the sounds of Stuka Dive Bombers flying in formation, I was struck by a scare,

Bang!

A sound like a balloon bomb exploding boomed from the back. My heart smashed against a rib and almost leapt out of my chest as I was completely left in the lurch,

"Hold it right there!"



Raising a battle cry as she swung the Student Council room door wide open, there was no mistaking the master as she released a voice that easily exceeded 100 decibels. The voice that made rippling vibrations on my eardrums kept going on.

"You quack of a Student Council President! What do you think you're doing, shutting away three of my loyal servants in such a place! I would've found out sooner or later, but if it was something so interesting, you should have told me first! And what did you do? You couldn't have been bullying Yuki, could you? It'd be okay if it were just Kyon, but if it's Yuki, I totally won't allow it! I'll beat you senseless and toss you from the window to the pool!"

Jumping in with a threatening poise like a mama cat that had picked up her kitten, ah, only one person fits the profile.

Although there was no need to turn around, I looked back to see the expression on that person's face. I knew it. It was my violent and lively classmate, whose whole body was radiating a happiness that just screamed, "I've found something interesting!"

"You can't hope to keep me out of this. I am the supreme leader of the SOS Brigade, after all!"

As Haruhi banged out her with her big mouth, she spotted the last boss in an instant. The huge pupils which seemed to be crammed with whole clusters of galaxies locked onto the lanky figure holding down his glasses.

"Are you the Student Council President? Alright, I'll take you on, head-to-head! It's the Chief versus the President, so the purse should be equivalent. You got nothing against that, right!?"

How did you know we were here? As I was about to state this naïve question,

"Hey, Kyon! Shouldn't you be doing something instead of just standing there, watching quietly? Don't hold back just because it's the Student Council President. If we all jump him and tie him up, that should be it. I'll put him in a lock, so you get the rope ready!"

Those eyes were going to burst with lava and flare up to make a caldera any time now. In contrast to this,

"……"

Nagato did not move an inch, like a frontline commander ignoring the arrival of reinforcements she had not asked for, and kept staring at Kimidori-san like a dormant volcano. However, instead of jumping the Student Council President or going off to search for some rope, I spied the expression on the person who was exposed to this intruder's threat.

It was a strange sign. The President's brows were knotted, and he was turned toward somewhere beside me with accusing eyes. It was at Koizumi, and for some reason, he seemed to shake his head a little. He had a bitter smile on his lips, and it seemed to me like these two had just completed some wordless communication; let's just forget I ever noticed anything.

“And what was that! If you’re going to summon somebody, I should be the first priority! You people may be the Student Council and all that, but how could you leave me, the Chief, out!?”

“Please calm down, Suzumiya-san.”

Koizumi nonchalantly placed his hand on Haruhi’s shoulder,

“Let’s hear the Student Council’s side first. We were still in the middle of our discussion.”

He suspiciously tried to meet my eyes. Damn you, just what do you want me to do?

The one thing I do know, is that our Excellency, Chief Haruhi, had gallantly come running for us in our predicament,

“Now that it’s come to this, I’m declaring total war! Because, for your information, we take on any challenge from anyone, anytime, anywhere! The SOS Brigade is made up of nothing but women (and men) of valor, who are invincible and know no mercy or fear. Even if you cry or kneel on the ground, we will not forgive you!”

It seems like she’s just making the situation more complicated.

Tsuruya-san, who had declared she would participate in the war in advance, Nagato, who was right at the verge of rage, and, as a bonus, Kimidori-san, who had made her unexpected return here; this much would’ve been complicated enough.

Incidentally, even Koizumi and the President were part of the picture for some reason.

“And Kyon, just what do you think you’re doing? Only Student Council Presidents should take on Student Council Presidents. It should be the easiest thing to realize that he’s not our enemy character. Don’t do battle here; take the fight somewhere else. Just glare at him with a more resolute attitude!”

The Student Council versus the SOS Brigade, huh…….

If only someone, somewhere would step on the switch for this event that I’d rather avoid. By no means do I want to think I have to be the one.

While looking at Haruhi, who, for some reason, seemed to be as delighted as she was angry, I had to consider if I should just go with the flow from here, though, in any case, the conviction swirling around in my chest wasn’t that much.

“Ah, well.”

Is, well, something natural to be murmuring, I’d like to think.

And in fact, they’ve just let out some not-so-good thing.

Haruhi, whose job had changed from Brigade Chief to Editor-in-Chief, was commissioned to turn us brigade members into instant authors and compose some quasi-novels, which is a situation as unprecedented as the Jupiter Ghost being completely targeted by Stinger anti-aircraft missiles.

Haruhi, like a short-fused street fighter who had come to the battle grounds after coming across a letter of challenge that had been sent to someone else,

“Come now, you corrupt President! Attack me any way you want! No referee stoppage so no holding back, and we’ll be going with the nashi-nashi rule with no rope break, got it!?”

Spouting off in an overbearing voice as he stood by the window, the Student Council President thrust out a finger with a snap.

At the same time, the President, without hiding the annoyance on his face, said,

“Suzumiya-kun. Though I do not know what sort of hand-to-hand combat you practice in your spare time, I have no intention of helplessly entering a battlefield that the opponent had prepared. The rules you talk of are at the pinnacle of barbarism. Repulsive. And most of all, for the Student Council, fights within the school are impermissible for any reason. Do remember this.”

Haruhi, without looking away from the President,

“Well then, what contest do you feel like? Wanna play Mahjong? Even if you bring out your ace pinch-hitter, it won’t matter against me. How about a computer game competition? It’s an offer you can’t refuse.”

“There will be no Mahjong, and no games.”

As the President elaborately took off his glasses and wiped them with his handkerchief, before putting them on again,

“I had no intention of holding a contest, or such, from the start. Do you think we have as much free time as you do to go playing around?”

As Haruhi lifted her foot to valiantly charge forward, I stopped her by grabbing on to her shoulder.

“Wait a sec, Haruhi. Who told you we were here?”

I asked, and she turned to me with a glint in her eye that exposed her fighting spirit.

“I heard it from Mikuru-chan. And Mikuru-chan said she heard it from Tsuruya-san. When I heard that it seemed like you were called by the Student Council President for something, it struck me. Yuki and Koizumi-kun weren’t in the club room as well. Huh-hmm, I immediately knew that the Student Council had moved at last. Since he knew that he’d lose to me for sure, he

thought of attacking a weak spot. It was obvious he would use such a cowardly, small-time scoundrel move."

The President was unperturbed even when he was called a small-time scoundrel. The tall figure of the sophomore gazed in annoyance at Haruhi, before he once again looked at Koizumi with a complaint in his eyes,

"Koizumi-kun. Would you please explain it to them. The reason why I had invited Nagato-kun."

"By your leave, Mister President."

Though Koizumi, the carefree-smiling lover of exposition, had opened his mouth in order to enlighten us,

"There's no need to explain anything."

Haruhi swiftly refused.

"After all, you've probably just served us false charges in order to destroy the Literature Club. If Yuki is no longer a club member, then we wouldn't be able to use the club room, right? You thought that since Yuki was an obedient, goody-goody girl, you could simply wheedle her out, but that won't do with me. If the SOS Brigade is such an eyesore for you, you should've just come and said it to us up front, not that sneaky manoeuvring from the side!"

Haruhi got excited by her own line. At any rate, her intuition was as expected. Under these circumstances, if you think that Koizumi would be disappointed that he wasn't able to explain away,

"I thank you for minimizing the time needed to explain. It is as you have said."

Koizumi didn't lose his smile as he feigned relief,

"However, we were still in the middle of our talk. Perhaps the President has more to say. Any way you look at it, forcing the Literature Club, an officially recognized club, to suspend its activities with no grace period at all is unreasonable. Although I don't think the Student Council has that much authority, what is it that you are proposing, Mister President?"

He finally explained it. Seeing that he was feeling the mood to watch such a transparently cheap play, the President acted more and more like an honor student.

"Of course, we in the Student Council do not want such a useless disturbance to occur. If the Literature Club had held activities fitting for the Literature Club, there wouldn't have been one complaint in the first place. What we see as a problem, is that there has not even been one such activity."

“Do you mean that we could alternatively change our club activities instead of the forced suspension?” Koizumi responded at once.

“It is not an alternative, it is a requirement.”

The President, in a troublesome manner,

“Even if it’s just once, you must hold an activity befitting the Literature Club. If you do that, then the indefinite suspension of club activities will be temporarily frozen. We will even allow your continuance in the clubroom.”

Haruhi put down the leg that she had been raising. However, with a face and voice that remained combative,

“It’s good that you understand things. While you’re at it, aren’t you going to recognize the SOS Brigade? Just go straight to making us a club and we’ll act like a study group. And then you can make allocations for our club expenses, can’t you?”

That was written in the student handbook. But the President, who could grant a two-rank special promotion to the brigade and it still wouldn’t be a club, without losing his sharpness,

“I know of no such brigade. There’s no way I can authorize the club activities of a brigade which officially does not exist, nor can I make more allocations from our meager budget.”

The President, who was slowly putting his arms together, met Haruhi’s scowl directly. To prove that he was not bluffing, the President didn’t sweat one drop. Just where was this composure coming from?

“I don’t want to hear anything more about any brigades in front of me. The topic right now is the Literature Club. I have no interest in finding out what sort of brigade you all had formed without permission. Even though I don’t know about it, if it reaches my ears, it will only become a problem for the Literature Club. More than that, you can just go on without giving me any discomfort.”

Though it would’ve been good if we had just gone away, no matter what kind of sleight of hand I use, it would just be a matter of time before Haruhi assaulted the Student Council room. No doubt she’d leap into action before the day is over. And I’m certain she’d be dragging me by my necktie as she went.

“But of course, not everything can be called a Literature Club activity. Holding a reading circle in the clubroom, writing book reports on the chosen book for the day――copying grade schoolers won’t make the cut. I, at least, wouldn’t allow it.”

“So what would you do?”

The glint in Haruhi’s eyes didn’t fade as she inclined her head a little.

“Kyon, aside from reading books, what does the Literature Club do around here? Any ideas?”

“Not one.”

What I said had come from deep within my heart. You should ask something like that from Nagato.

“There is only one requirement.”

The President said, ignoring our conversation.

“You have to publish an organ. According to our records, even though the past generations of the Literature Club were always stricken by a shortage of members, they were still able to issue one volume every year. This activity is most likely to give you exposure. The Literature Club, self-explanatorily, is a club that infuses art into the creation of sentences. You don’t get a story from just reading.”

So that means Nagato hasn’t been doing what a club member is supposed to at all for the last year. She’s done nothing but read since whenever. ……Oh that Nagato.

My head shook involuntarily. I did not want to remember that bespectacled Literature Club member who wore a troubled face in front of an outdated computer at a time like this. Seeing her in my dreams at night is enough.

“I disapprove.”

Seeming to misunderstand my behavior, the President wore an even more disapproving face, himself.

“Do not forget that this is the minimal concession. By all rights, we could have announced this plan during the Culture Festival. I want you to feel a little obligation to me for waiting so long. Then again, if it were anyone other than me, you would probably go on free interminably.”

Setting myself and Nagato aside, only Haruhi would want to go on free.

“I cannot let that happen. I won the election for President of the Student Council by pledging for school reformation. As you have known, the Student Council then was just the Student Council in name, and there was no room for student independence. Following the plans that had been drawn up in the staff room, I made serious on what I had said like a body of air.”

The President delivered such a rousing speech indifferently.

“I wished to break away from that situation. Students wanting more items to be added to the cafeteria menu while getting better value for their purchases; even such trivial matters have to be discussed, and I thought that by negotiating on the side of the school, the way to realization would follow.”

?」Brigade「 instead of a 」Study Group「 or 」Club「 Though I'm grateful that he's working so hard for the sake of the students, how about listening to a single student's wish to be recognized as a

"I am making 'serious reformation' my slogan. If I formally approve such an unserious brigade, my reputation would crash to the earth. I will not accept it."

Said The President, after rejecting my request,

"The term is one week. One week after today, you must finish publishing two hundred copies of the Literature Club magazine. Otherwise, I will recommend that the Literature Club be suspended, and you must surrender the clubroom. No complaints will be considered."

Anyway, about that journal. Is it something like an anthology?

"Fine, then."

Haruhi accepted simply. Nagato should be the one saying that, not you.

Nagato would speak nothing, of course, but even if it might've been better for Haruhi to respond since there was nothing more to say, I feel that Nagato's silence here was different from her usual, taciturn disposition.

"……"

Nagato had been staring at Kimidori-san the whole time, and they both did not turn their eyes away at all. Nagato was expressionless, and Kimidori-san had on a weak smile.

Looking happy for some reason I didn't understand, Haruhi didn't seem to recognize Kimidori-san, the SOS Brigade's first and only client, at all. It seems like she's been so busy glaring at the President, that her thoughts hadn't even turned to the secretary. Maybe she doesn't remember her face. She never saw that *kamadouma*.

Haruhi, with a face like a mathematician that had just proven a proposition,

"A journal, a club journal, huh? Is it something like a doujinshi? People writing stories, essays, columns, poems, and stuff?"

"The contents are not of my concern," the President said. "You may use the printing room as you wish. You may write whatever you wish. However, there is a second part to the requirements. We will establish a time table for the production of the journal, and you must follow it. And though it should go without saying that distribution will be free, you must follow this as well. Promotional activities and personal deliveries are not allowed. That includes going out as bunny girls, among other things. Not one person should stubbornly neglect this, because if all copies are not out within three days, a penalty will be imposed."

"What kind of penalty?"

Haruhi, who was a sucker for penalty games, leaned forward with glittering eyes.

The President, in an annoying manner,

“When that time comes, we will inform you. But you will want to be prepared. We can start with performing volunteer activities, indefinitely. As I have repeatedly said, this is a concession.”

The arbitrary destruction of a home giving way to conflict would be unfortunate, the President seemed to be thinking. Even if you haven’t read the history of the *Akou* clan, it’s easy for anyone to guess. Furthermore, the opponent was Haruhi. I can’t think that the President is pleased with himself even in his own head. The pitiful school itself would run away.

Although I’m leaving whether this is submission or a concession to future judgment, this “Organ Publication” is just a way of evading the matter on the Student Council’s part. And even if you call it an organ, it’s in no way related to Koizumi’s background, so it should just be a journal. Or maybe Literature Club publication. You say you’re seeking the fruits of artistic writing borne of our club activities, but just how are we to do that? Who’s going to do the writing? Even more, why do I see Haruhi looking strangely delighted?

“Well, isn’t that interesting!”

Haruhi showed a smile like a child who had just learned a new game.

“An organ, a journal, or a doujinshi is okay. We’ll do it even if you say there’s no use in trying. For Yuki’s sake. She’ll be troubled if the Literature Club is no more. That room already belongs to me, and what I hate more than anything is when something of mine is taken.”

Haruhi’s arm wasn’t on me, but was stretched around the nape of Nagato’s neck.

“Well then, if that’s been settled, we will go into a meeting without delay. Yuki, I’ll credit your name as publisher in the copyright page. I’ll be taking care of everything else, of course, so don’t you worry. First things first, let’s all go and investigate how to publish an organ!”

Haruhi held the back of Nagato’s collar,

“……”

She lightly pulled on Nagato, who had been standing quietly, as if Nagato were a balloon, opened the door with a bang, then started running with a force like the initial velocity of a rifle bullet.

Though I saw Nagato floating on only her tiptoes when I looked over my shoulder, the sight disappeared in an instant; Haruhi, who had come bounding into the Student Council room like the wind, grew into the power of a typhoon before she passed.

“Such a noisy girl.”

The President, who had spoken such a sensible impression, shook his head, and swung his eyes to the nearby table.

“Kimidori-kun, that is enough for you as well. You may leave.”

“Yes, Mister President.”

Kimidori-san meekly bowed her head in assent, closed the minutes, and then quietly stood up. After returning the notebook to the bookshelf, she nodded lightly to the President before starting to walk.

As she passed by, she gave me a quick bow. Without meeting my eyes, she exited through the door that Haruhi had flung open. From that last, soft flutter of her hair, came a most wonderful smell. It was gone before I knew it.

As I was thinking about the connection between Nagato and Kimidori-san, the President snorted through his nose and spoke.

“Koizumi, close the door.”

Sensing the complete change in tone from a while ago, my eyes went back to the President. Koizumi closed the door, and the President, after confirming that it had been locked, pulled a nearby pipe chair to himself and sat down roughly, then threw his legs over the table.

What?

However, it was still too early to act surprised. The President frowned while searching around in his uniform pocket, and just as I was thinking, he was bringing out a cigarette and a lighter, put it to his lips and lit it, and did he just start puffing out smoke?

It was an act that you’d never think the President of the Student Council would do. As I was feeling like I had discovered the scene of an arson that was committed by a fireman,

“That’ll do, Koizumi.”

The President left the cigarette in his mouth as he took off his glasses, and, instead of a cell phone, brought out an ashtray he had been keeping in his pocket,

“Even if the plans changed a little, it happened just as you said. But it is a real pain, having to act like an idiot. Put yourself in my position. Talking continuously in that damned serious voice is tiring.”

Tapping the ash from his smoldering cigarette into the ash tray, the cool expression that the President had maintained until then changed completely.

“What’s with being Student Council President anyway. I don’t want to be something like that. It’s nothing but trouble. Moreover, all I’m doing is making an enemy of that girl with the over-active brain. Talk about a stupid job.”

The President, who, in an instant, had completely turned prickly, pushed the cigarette, which was giving off some nasty fumes, to the side of the ash tray to put it out, then he pulled out a new stick and turned to me.

“Do you smoke?”

“I’ll pass.”

I shook my head, and as I finished, I took the opportunity to give Koizumi’s smiling profile a stabbing look.

“Is the President one of your associates?”

Probably, I thought. I tried to make a strange sort of eye contact; if you’re going to talk about the Literature Club, you shouldn’t go through Koizumi and company and just go straight to calling on Nagato. I don’t have to think much; there should be no reason for me to take the Student Council’s side.

Koizumi caught my look, and showed off his smiling face in reply.

“If you call him an associate then he is an associate, but he’s an associate in a difference sense from Arakawa-san and Mori-san. He isn’t necessarily a part of the ‘Organization’.”

Koizumi glanced at the President, who had been puffing the smoke of his second cigarette up to the ceiling,

“He is our agent within the school. To talk a little bit about his motives, he provides us assistance in exchange for certain conditions. If Mori-san and I are part of the inner sanctum, then he is of the nave.”

It’s okay no matter how many you people are, but how’d you get the President of the Student Council to do that for you?

“You could say that it is the result of tremendous effort on my part. I made him, half-hearted as he is, stand for candidacy, strove to make him the leading contender with the recommendation of the previous Student Council President, and gain the favor of the constituency, and after getting the votes of the majority, we worked on our electoral campaign to get an even bigger advantage, until finally we succeeded in putting him up as president. It was rather laborious work.”

What an appalling story.

“For his success with the presidential polls, the necessary cost was about the same as the expense for a trifling political party to run in the snap elections for the House of Representatives.”

The story went beyond appalling, and was now causing the life to drain out of me.

“According to Koizumi’s story.”

As the President coughed up smoke in irritation,

“Before that idiot girl Suzumiya thinks up something strange or something like that, it was deemed necessary for me to become president. Because of this, I was made to take on this role and wear a face suitable for the Student Council President. Could there really be a story so ridiculous? I was even made to wear those glasses for show.”

The story had become even more appalling than before.

“After comprehensively investigating the image of what Suzumiya-san pictures the President of the Student Council to be, we found him to be the one most fitting in this school. Under the circumstances, we did not consider his nature. Looks and atmosphere alone were material.”

And he was also careless enough to be convinced by Koizumi’s explanation.

Tall, handsome, and bespectacled; it was irrelevant that he was a pompous upper-classman. He was also taking the unpleasant duty of filling the Haruhi-type bad guy position as the Student Council President that was using his station to charge a bevy of false accusations on a tiny cultural club.

Indeed, that is what Haruhi has been waiting for: a quick and easy villain.

However, the fact that you went to all that trouble to produce a Student Council President to Haruhi’s satisfaction, means that Haruhi isn’t so omnipotent after all. If she really was an almighty and all-knowing god, you wouldn’t have to work so much or anything. And working hard for all that maneuvering; isn’t that exactly what you did?

“But because of our exertions, a president that suited Suzumiya-san’s wishes was produced as a result, and since that was still her desire, can you not say that it was realized through her being almighty? Since, consequently, that is still what happened.”

He’s rationalizing again. Only Tsuruya-san can outrival Koizumi’s mouth.

The President put out his cigarette in irritation,

“Anyway, Koizumi. Next year, you better declare for candidacy and become Student Council President. If you’re saying you want to prevent a situation where Suzumiya or someone declares for candidacy, this time you should just do it yourself.”

“Well now, what shall I do? I’ve been relatively busy, and I’ve got a feeling that the Suzumiya-san of these days wouldn’t be a problem even if she became Student Council President.”

More like a big problem. If Haruhi personally sets out to subjugate the school, what are you going to do? I have a premonition that we’re going to be dragged into a troublesome situation somehow. She may be planning to SOS Brigade-ize North High’s entire student body. That girl, she might just assume that every student is the Student Council President’s subordinate. The whole school will become alternate space.

Well, I don’t think Haruhi’s going to get the seat of the President of the Student Council as long as the voting is done honestly, so I guess it’s okay. I still believe that North High students have common sense, if not good sense. Unless Koizumi does something strange, no matter what kind of election activities are done, Haruhi probably won’t get to reign at the top of the whole school.

As I let out a sigh,

“In other words, Koizumi, this is another one of your scenarios. The Student Council plotting to scrap the Literature Club――――or pretending to be, you have again sowed the seeds for that girl to kill some time.”

“But it is only a seed.”

Koizumi blew into the smoke that had been hanging in the air,

“What happens from here on is unknown. If we get to the settlement date for the club journal, and we haven’t finished, or if we are not able to meet the requirements…….”

He nimbly shrugged his shoulders.

“When that time comes, we’ll just come up with another game. Your brain alone would suffice.”

Participating as an observer is okay, but if it’s a position where I have to question myself on problems that I’ve been saddled with, then I’m sorry. Generally, how will doing such a thing benefit me?

“About my acting as the Student Council President,” said the delinquent President. “I do it because it is delicious. First is the grades. That was the biggest incentive that Koizumi used to persuade me. And you said that I’ll have an edge on my college exams. You better not forget that.”

“Of course I remember. Naturally, we are making arrangements for this to happen.”

The President turned to Koizumi with eyes that looked like they were interrogating a suspicious person and, hfff, let out a breath through his nose,

“I should hope so. Being the President of the Student Council is just too much work, but I’ve come to understand a few things these past few months. The Student Council from before was really just a bunch of useless suits. It didn’t matter if they were there or not. Meaning, we can play around with things as much as we want.”

That was the first smile the President had shown. Though it seemed to have a bit of vileness, it was a much more human expression than his calm and cool mask.

“Respect student independence; that’s such an empty slogan. Just how do you interpret that? My interest is particularly piqued by the budget. Now that is yummy to lay your eyes on.”

The President was getting more and more surprising. That’s just like what Haruhi would expect. He’s a villain, all right.

“Though a little abuse of authority is permissible,” Koizumi said calmly, “please don’t get carried away. Even though we are covering for you, there is a limit.”

“I know that. I won’t goof up like getting cocky with the teachers, or I’ll lose my hold on the executives’ sympathy. We should create an adequate reason to sweep out the noisy remnants of the old Student Council. Then there will be no one to defy me any longer.”

The President was really getting into it. While he was talking nonsense, for some reason I felt a strange force pulling me in. I feel uncomfortable saying that this guy’s okay, but…….

Suddenly, Tsuruya-san’s face came back to my mind as alarm klaxons went off. What she said to me when we bumped into each other in the corridor was now clear. That girl possessed such keen intuition, that she had perceived that the current President of the Student Council had a hidden side. The Student Council’s spy――――wasn’t me, but Koizumi, Tsuruya-san. And he was not just a spy; he was the mastermind.

Though I’m not particularly concerned about how the President is taking advantage of his post and his predisposition for evil, if, by any chance, Haruhi realizes this, she might propose an immediate recall and recommend Tsuruya-san to be the next president. And I have a hunch that Tsuruya-san would charge right in alongside her with a burst of laughter. If that happens, Koizumi and I will automatically be pulled in to Haruhi’s side, and the President will be overthrown.

I wish you luck with your shadow endeavors, Mister President. Just do as you please in the places that we do not see.

Well, you probably planned on doing so even if I didn’t say it, and even though you’ll be playing a role that will frequently go against Haruhi, I hope you don’t make a mistake in choosing your angles.

I got beside Koizumi after we left the room, and as we walked along the school corridor on our way back to the clubroom, I remembered something that I had to ask him.

"As I understand it, the President is under your personal supervision. Then what about the secretary? That Kimidori-san, is she one of your colleagues?"

"You are mistaken."

Koizumi, like it was nothing,

"Kimidori-san had taken the secretary post before I even knew it. Truth is, she was already there when I had become aware of her, so I didn't concern myself about it. At the early stages of the present Student Council, we had felt like we should appoint a different student as secretary. When we investigated it later, the records showed that she has been the secretary from the very beginning. In everyone's memories as well. No one, including the President, had questioned it. Even if they had falsified everything, it was a falsification beyond common sense."

If it is beyond common sense, why don't you speak with a little more surprise?

"My surprise is to such an extent, that if something more surprising were to happen, I might have cardiac arrest."

As we leisurely walked on, Koizumi turned his face to the window in the corridor,

"Kimidori Emiri-san is one of Nagato-san's colleagues. There's no mistaking that."

That's just as I thought. Kimidori-san coming to us with a request at the time of the *kamadouma*; that's just too much of a coincidence. If it was just that, I might have been convinced that the whole thing was just arranged by Nagato and that everything was good, but considering the current situation, our encounter back then was no accident. Thinking about what kind of colleague she is worries me.

"There was also the case of Asakura Ryouko. There is, however, no need to worry about that point anymore. It seems like Kimidori-san and Nagato-san have a somewhat closer connection. At least they haven't shown any hostility between each other."

I have an idea why. It didn't appear like they were on good terms. But it didn't seem like it was going to get worse.

"We in the 'Organization' wanted to evaluate our intelligence gathering capability a little. Though they weren't that many, the 'Organization' contacted some TFEI's similar to Nagato-san, in an attempt to understand their intentions. While they were by no means cooperative, we were able to make some deductions based on bits and pieces of conversation. It seems like Kimidori-san was dispatched by a school within the Integrated Data Sentient Entity which is different from Nagato-san's. However, it is different from Asakura Ryouko's; we know that they aren't aggressive."

I, having listened to Koizumi talk about that gossip, also had the same hunch, and since nothing was going to start anytime soon, neither Koizumi nor I were anxious.

Despite knowing that even aliens must have diversity, for sure Kimidori-san is one. She seemed to warn Nagato, who had become absolutely furious in the Student Council room, to inaction, so she might be from a peaceable school.

"That may be so. We concluded that there was no need to be overly conscious of her. What I think, is that Kimidori-san is Nagato-san's chaperone. I do not know since when, but it seems she has settled into that role for now."

Koizumi spoke with his voice sounding like he was in the middle of an expedition to climb a mountain, so I left it at that. As for Nagato, various memories of her were inside me. If I could, I'd just go on keeping more and more of those things to myself. Even though we're all members of the SOS Brigade, I'd rather not explain things to Koizumi often. But I could play back my memories any number of times even if I just recall things by myself.

For some reason, I silently hurried on my way to the clubroom, and Koizumi also kept his mouth closed as he followed.

If you input weird information in rapid succession, what you hear afterwards will surely remain.

Therefore, I didn't forget.

That Haruhi, who had flown away after snatching Nagato, was probably inside.

I went into idle thought about the outlaw President of the Student Council and Kimidori-san.

As I opened the door to the Literature Club room, Haruhi's thunderous voice brought me back from my daydreaming.

"You're late, Kyon! And Koizumi as well. What were you doing? Dangit, time is limited! You'd better start moving quickly!"

She seemed so happy, it was like there was no limit to it at the moment. Haruhi had that look on her face that she gets, without fail, whenever she has decided to set her sights on whatever goal.

"We've been frantically looking for the club journals the Literature Club had made. I asked Yuki but she said she didn't know."

Nagato was sitting on an isolated seat by a corner of the table. What she had been staring at, was the screen of a notebook computer the Computer Club had left us.

"Umm……"

Asahina-san was fidgeting as she stood in her maid costume with a worried look on her face.

“Is someone going to make a book? Is it us? If so, what might we be writing……?”

I didn’t forget that either. Haruhi was going blindly into the making of the Literature Club’s journal as the Student Council President had told us to do. For Nagato’s sake. Nagato was the only member of the Literature Club, and the truth was that she had another face as the member of an illegal school organization that had been possessing their clubroom despite being outsiders. But since the chief of the brigade gave her the okay, it had become the collective responsibility of the SOS Brigade to make the club journal. So ultimately, a part of that responsibility will be certainly dumped on my head, and more than that, we wouldn’t be able to complete the club journal if somebody doesn’t write something, and that somebody does not exempt any brigade member, including me.

“Now then, pick one.”

Lying in Haruhi’s palm, were four folded scraps of paper. The paper lots were like those used for classroom seating assignments. Though I was doubtful about what these lots were going to decide, I picked one up with my fingers. Haruhi grinned just as I did.

Koizumi looked amused, and Asahina-san was nervous as they each took a scrap of paper into their hands, and as Haruhi passed the last lot to Nagato,

“You will be writing what is written there. That will then be placed in the club journal. Once we’ve settled everything, you will immediately take your seats! It’s time to start writing!”

As an unpleasant premonition went through the top of my head, I opened the paper lot that was made from a cut-up notebook page. Haruhi’s handwriting jumped out like a freshly-sliced fish that was served as-is.

“Romance story.”

Came from my mouth as I read it out loud. I was immediately plagued by agony. A romance story? Me? I have to write such a thing?

“Right you are.”

Said Haruhi, with a smile like a tactician that was taking advantage of a person’s weakness,

“It’s been decided fair and square by lottery. I won’t accept any complaints. Well then, what are you doing, Kyon? Get in front of the computer right now.”

I looked around, and there on the table were an adequate number of notebook computers that had been left in startup status. Although time and effort aren’t needed to prepare well, can we write quickly when you’ve only just told us to write?

While I was considering the scrap of paper in my hand like it was a grenade with the pin pulled out,

“Koizumi, what did you pick?”

I asked as I looked for a way out, but while I was thinking that we could possibly switch,

“Mystery…… is what I got.”

Koizumi answered with his refreshing smile as before; his face did not look particularly worried. Then Asahina-san, with her face embarrassed as usual,

“For me, it’s a fairy-tale. Fairy-tales are aimed at children, so, um, will a bedtime story do?”

You don’t have to answer that even if you heard me. But, from a mystery to a fairy-tale? Between those and a romance story, which would you prefer?

I turned my attention to Nagato. As Nagato quietly opened her scrap of paper, she noticed my look, and lightly turned her wrist to show me Haruhi’s lively handwriting. What she had written there was “fantasy horror.”

Though I didn’t know what the difference was between a fantasy horror and a mystery,

“I’m relieved that it’s not a romance story at least. Because if it were me, I don’t think I could write something like that.”

Koizumi said, as if he were trying to tweak my nerve, and made an obvious show of being relieved. I want to know the secret to how you can act so relaxed.

“That is simple. In my case, there were the mystery games that we conducted in the summer of last year and winter of this year, which I could treat as real events and novelize. After all, those were my scenarios from the start.”

Koizumi coolly turned to the table, and loosened his expression as he began working on the notebook computer. Nagato lowered her eyes to the liquid crystal while keeping perfectly still. She could’ve been pondering what a fantasy horror was, or maybe she was just thinking about Kimidori-san.

There was no need for explanations, but panic marks were swirling within Asahina-san’s eyes as she went all nervous, and I was probably the same. Then I thought about it more. There were only four scrap paper lots. And the SOS Brigade had five members.

“Haruhi.”

I said, standing like an image of the two Deva kings after inhaling some laughing gas,

“What are you going to write?”

“Oh yeah, what I’m going to write.”

Haruhi sat at the chief's desk, and raised an arm band that had been prepared in advance.

"But you see, there's a much more important job for me. Listen up. A lot of work goes into the making of a book. There has to be someone who will handle all the supervision. And I'll be the one who's going to do that."

Haruhi, after swiftly putting on the arm band, declared as she puffed out her chest in pride.

"For one week starting today, I will be temporarily sealing my role as the Brigade Chief. Since this is the Literature Club, a different position is appropriate."

The brightly shining new arm band told the whole story.

And thus Haruhi arbitrarily selected herself to be the Editor-in-Chief, ignoring the bewildered Asahina-san and me as she flamboyantly spoke.

"Okay then, everyone! Get to work at once! You'll be writing anyhow, so no grumbling! And it better be amusing!"

Haruhi laid back in the chief's seat as she stretched out her legs, and lorded over the miserable brigade members.

"Of course, if I don't find it amusing, then it's no good."

So————

In the week following that day, we stationed ourselves in the Literature Club room, and for that matter, we were diligently working on a Literature-Club-like activity.

Running bravely on the forefront was Asahina-san. Although it's been decided that a fairy tale suits her, if someone were told to write without warning and that someone started writing without any objections, then it would be simple for anyone to become a fairy tale writer.

Still, Asahina-san was a hard worker. With an earnest face, she would read from a mountain of books she had borrowed from the library, stick post-its anywhere and everywhere, and then diligently push her pencil.

Haruhi, meanwhile, was grinning as she gazed through a *doujinshi* she had borrowed from the Manga Club as a resource material.

Asahina-san was steadily submitting manuscripts, and Haruhi steadily kept on rejecting them.

"Hmm."

As Haruhi hummed, she continued to read the manuscript that Asahina-san, who was growing weak, had submitted who knows how many times,

“It’s a lot better, but it still lacks impact. Ah, that’s it, Mikuru-chan, go and add in some drawings. Make it feel more like a picture book. People will be attracted with just one quick look, and you’ll bring out the flavor that text alone cannot.”

“Drawings?”

Asahina-san seemed to weep at the additional, unreasonable demand. However, to overturn something Editor-in-Chief Haruhi has suggested even once is no ordinary feat, so Asahina-san gave in once more and wearily started drawing.

The all-too sincere Asahina-san, went to the Art Club and attended a lecture on sketching, then continued on to the Manga Club to study how to write four panel comics, showing perseverance without saying anything more, and since making tea is naturally difficult, I had to silently sip on tasteless green tea that Koizumi and I had made, and passed the time in inactivity.

And so, there’s no romance story yet. But if it were a cat observation diary, I’d have as much material as I need.

Only Koizumi was harmoniously making progress with his pen, as Nagato occasionally hit some keys. Though her high speed touch typing during the game war was unbelievable, it seems like she wasn’t having much success transforming the information in her head into words. I began to think whether there were some reason for her silence, but all the same, the fantasy horror that Nagato was writing was pulling on my interest, so I peered into her display,

“……”

Nagato quickly turned the notebook computer sideways, protecting the display from my eyes, and expressionlessly looked up.

Come on, just a little bit.

“No.”

Nagato said in a small voice, and every time I tried to look, she would change the angle with perfect timing. No matter how many times I tried, it was impossible. That just got me a little more interested, and a little while later, I tried jumping out from behind Nagato, but I could not surpass Nagato’s reflexes, and finally,

“……”

Nagato pierced me with a silent look from the side, and I was easily repelled. Returning to my own seat, I went back to monitoring the white screen of the word processor where not a single character had been written――――.

Well, the events that were unfolding in this club room, were how these past few days had felt like.

Things came to something of an impasse, but even though it had become a sort of flying sensation, a change of pace came at the same time as Asahina-san gave an advanced introduction of her fairy-tale picture book.

Having been continually rejected by Editor-in-Chief Haruhi, and then having drawings added under orders, Asahina-san's work continually troubled her, so when I saw her agonizing over word selection, I had to throw in my suggestions, and finally, it was completed after the Editor-in-Chief put in her own revisions.

Well, I'll give it a look for the time being.

It was not so long ago, but it was a story from before the present.

Deep in the forest of a certain small country, there was a lone mountain cabin.

And there lived Snow White together with the Seven Dwarves.

Snow White had not been driven out, but had run away from the castle by herself and come here. Life in the castle was not so interesting to her, it seems. Since it was a small country and she was their princess, they had decided to make use of her by arranging a marriage of convenience. Isn't that detestable? Snow White thought so, too.

However, she was slowly getting tired of living in the forest as well.

Thanks to the Dwarves, I don't have to worry about food, clothing, or shelter, and I've become good friends with the animals in the forest, but I wonder if the castle is doing well by itself, she came to think.

Those egotistic words just jumped out, but the castle was filled with nothing but good people. On the date when the arranged marriage was supposed to happen, the Small Country had to take hostages and form alliances just so they could get strong enough to survive.

At around the same time, a mermaid who was swimming in a beach near the forest had just rescued a prince who had been left abandoned on a shipwreck.

The mermaid moved the Prince to the shore, but the unconscious Prince just kept on sleeping. He didn't wake up no matter what she did. The worried mermaid then made up her mind to take him to where Snow White was.

Snow White had been her friend since the time she had gone to the forest. And the mermaid remembered that Snow White had said, "If you find something interesting, bring it to me!"

The mermaid asked the Good-Natured Witch to change her fish tail to legs, and she carried the unconscious Prince to the Dwarves' cabin.

But even when she saw the Prince that the mermaid had brought, Snow White wasn't delighted much. What she thought of as interesting was a little different. A prince that just kept on sleeping was not something she found that appealing…….

Although having to take care of someone was exciting at the beginning, Snow White was becoming more and more bored with it. Because he never opened his eyes at all. She was getting tired of looking at his sleeping face.

I wonder if he'll wake up if I hit him hard, she started thinking, when an express messenger from Snow White's castle had come.

This is what the messenger said. Our neighbor, the Great Empire, has mobilized a vast force to cross into our borders, and lay siege to the castle, and the way things were going, it's going to fall soon, if it hasn't fallen already.

How dreadful.

When Snow White heard that, she left the Prince, who never woke up no matter how long they waited, in the care of the mermaid, and left the forest with the Seven Dwarves. The first place they went to was a craggy mountain. There, the Tactician who had become a hermit lived by himself. If the tales were true, then he would not associate with someone unless they had visited him three times, but Snow White ordered the Dwarves to capture the Tactician, and she appointed him their Chief-of-Staff. The Tactician smiled bitterly, and with a "Well, okay I guess," he gave his allegiance to Snow White.

Thus the number of Snow White's party grew to nine, and as soon as they had climbed down from the mountain, they gathered volunteer soldiers in the towns and villages where the Empire's forces had not yet been to. They were totally unable to assemble enough people to match the Great Empire's troops, but all the same, Snow White raised an anti-imperialist banner and set out for the castle. They defeated the Imperial Forces that had been sent to intercept them one by one, and garnered a series of victories in various places, until they finally recaptured the castle, after which they pursued and annihilated the retreating Imperials, then went on from there by making a counter-invasion and overthrowing the Empire in the blink of an eye, and the country became a part of her own dominion. How surprising.

It did not end there. Snow White, the Tactician, and the Seven Dwarves, formed a big army and ran through all of the countries in all of the land, and using various strategies and conspiracies,

they were able to unite the continent. The Age of the Warring States was ended, and they were visited by a period of peace and harmony.

Snow White, having nothing more to do, left the rest to the Tactician and went home to the forest. Though she was no longer concerned about the arranged marriage, returning to the castle would just mean getting bored everyday. Playing freely in the forest was better.

Snow White came back to the cabin along with the Seven Dwarves, and was surprised to see that the Prince was still sleeping. She had completely forgotten about him.

Ah, during that time, the mermaid had been taking good care of the Prince.

Snow White grabbed an apple the Forest Bear had brought while visiting, and used it to hit the Prince on the head.

“That’s too much sleep already, now wake up!”

It is said that the Prince opened his eyes, three days later.

What happened to everyone after that, no one knows.

Still, I feel certain that everyone became happy. And I wish that they all did.

……How do I say this, that was just so like Asahina-san; even though it was a fable of jumbled up fairy-tales mixed in with war stories, the feeling of desperation reaches through to us like it was our own. This was already more than adequate. Which parts Haruhi had her hand in, I leave to your imagination.

Okay, enough about Asahina-san’s worries, the problem now is how the task that’s been given to me is still untouched. That plot to make me write a story was unreasonable from the start, but if

you add in the romance theme, then it moves way past unreasonable and goes straight into the world of foreign concepts. Just what can I do?

On the other hand, it surprised me how Haruhi had engaged in activities that were relatively appropriate for Editor-in-Chief.

Between us four, the number of pages for the manuscript was running short, and Haruhi, who had brought up that we were lacking variety, finally resorted to outsourcing for some writers.

The very first to become victims were Taniguchi and Kunikida, and then continued on to Tsuruya-san and the Computer Club President getting the position of holding the deadline that Haruhi had established.

It seems like everyone had become Associate Brigade Members as far as Haruhi was concerned, but they were all totally unrelated to the Literature Club.

Though I didn't have any time to feel sorry for myself, I'd still prefer it if the responsibility of having to write would just disappear. But I don't think Haruhi would ever let it pass if I ran away from my article.

As the time limit that the evil-acting Student Council President had set drew closer and closer, Taniguchi let out, "Why do I have to write an Interesting Days essay or whatever!" in a resentful voice, and, "Now, now, Taniguchi. That's better than my twelve-part Subject-by-Subject-Study-Aids column, isn't it?" Kunikida's easygoing voice struck my ears while we were waiting for morning homeroom one day.

Haruhi, who had come to school later than me, thrust some copy paper at me without saying good morning.

"What's this?"

"Yesterday, Yuki submitted her manuscript when it was time to go home."

Haruhi made a face like she had swallowed some dental filling that had broken off along with some toothpaste,

"I read through it carefully at home, but it's a pretty strange story. Even though fantastical horror is still horror, I had trouble evaluating it. And it's only as lengthy as a short-short story. Here, you read it for a bit."

If it's the article Nagato had written without saying anything, then I'll read it as much as I can.

I took the copy paper from Haruhi, and started following the printed text with my eyes.

Nagato Yuki_Untitled 1

I am a ghost, said the girl when we met about xxxx before.

When I asked for her name, “I do not have a name.” was her answer. “Since I do not have a name, I am a ghost. You are probably the same.” the girl continued.

That is correct. I am also a ghost. If a being is able to converse with ghosts, then that being must also be a ghost. Like I am now.

“Well then, shall we go?”

She said, and I followed. The girl’s steps were so light, she looked completely alive. “Where will you go?” the girl asked me, as she stopped moving her feet and turned around.

“You can go anywhere. Was there a place you wanted to go to?”

I was lost in thought for a moment. Where have I gotten to? What is this place? Why am I here?

As I stood still, I couldn’t help but gaze into the girl’s dark eyes.

“Weren’t you thinking of going to xxxx?”

The girl had discerned my answer. When I heard those words, I finally understood what my own role was. Yes. I was on my way there. How could I forget? For this important matter, I had a reason to live and exist.

It is something I must not forget.

“So, that’s that, then.”

The girl smiled happily. I nodded, and expressed my thanks to her.

“Good bye.”

The girl disappeared, leaving me by myself. She had probably returned to her place. And in the same way, I had to return to my place.

White things were falling from the sky. Numerous, tiny, fluttering, aqueous crystals. They fell to the earth and vanished.

It was one of the wonders that filled time and space. In this world, such wonders were common. I stood absolutely still. The passing of time had lost its meaning.

Those wonders of bound cotton continued to fall, one after another.

This shall be my name.

And with that thought, I was a ghost no more.

“Hmm……?”

I raised my face after reading that much.

Before morning homeroom, students were arriving steadily; a familiar scene that was spreading throughout the classroom. Ordinarily, Haruhi would be gazing outside the window in the seat behind me, or poking at my back with a mechanical pencil, but this time, Haruhi was stretching out her neck as she peered into my hand, looking troubled, and my face was thoughtful as I chased letters on the copy paper with my eyes.

Well, I was probably making a face that closely resembled Haruhi’s.

And it was all because of what had been written. Being made to read that first thing in the morning is more than a little difficult, I feel.

"Fantasy Horror" As I recall it, the lot that Nagato had drawn was

Having lifted my eyes from Nagato’s story, I turned sideways to face Haruhi’s profile.

“Hey Haruhi, I might not be familiar with fantasy or horror, but are recent fantasy horrors like this?”

“I’m not familiar with it, either.”

Haruhi put her hand on her chin, and tilted her head like an editor who was facing a writer that, in her judgement, had written something troubling.

“It feels like a fantasy, but it’s not much of a horror. But, hmm. Doesn’t it feel very Yuki-like? Maybe, Yuki gets scared at that stuff.”

If there was something that made Nagato feel scared, then I’d probably be terrified the most and the worst if I were to see it. I really don’t want something like that to appear. Even if it’s just inside a story.

“By the way, you.”

As I viewed Haruhi’s confused face with fresh thought,

“If you didn’t know anything about Fantasy Horrors, why did you make her write such a thing? You should’ve considered that when you were deciding on the genres.”

“I did consider it. A little.”

Haruhi confiscated the first sheet of copy paper from my hands,

“I felt that a simple horror wouldn’t be interesting, so I added fantasy to it. That’s the result when I deliberated on which genres to write on the lots. A mystery, a fairy-tale, a romance story――――if you consider these, all that’s left is horror, isn’t it?”

You missed Sci-Fi. Moreover, I don’t think you spent any more than three seconds to deliberate on the genre selection. You probably just scribbled down what you randomly thought of one by one.

Haruhi gave a slight smile,

“I thought I’d make you all write something different through miscasting. Since Sci-Fi is Yuki’s specialty, that wouldn’t be any fun, don’t you think?”

I jerked involuntarily, but an invisible hand patted me on the chest. Setting aside whether or not it would be Sci-Fi, Nagato could write something cosmic without blinking an eye. Since she was an alien, anyway. Though I thought that Haruhi might have noticed something, the many Sci-Fi books in Nagato’s collection probably made it obvious even to Haruhi, so it isn’t strange that she would know Nagato’s specialty.

No, wait. If that was the case, then the same would be true for mysteries.

“Yep, if I could help it, I wanted Mikuru-chan or you to write the mystery. Seeing what kind of crazy thing you’d submit would’ve been interesting. But if it was sci-fi, it would’ve been allowed even if it wasn’t wild, is why. So I had to cross it out even if it broke my heart.”

that I had been saddled with won’t be cancelled, and for that matter, even if I could’ve written a mystery, fairy-tale, or fantasy horror, they’re not that much better than a romance story. If only it were sci-fi, then I could’ve used some of my experiences as a basis. But then, I don’t think I should let Editor-in-Chief Haruhi know about any of my actual experiences as it is.⌋Romance Story⌈ Though I wanted to retort about how biased that was, even if I made something out of the contents of the lottery or the results, the time won’t be reset. At this stage, the order to write a

As Haruhi flapped Nagato’s fantasy horror short-story about,

“Well, it’s good that Koizumi-kun got the mystery. Of course, if there isn’t at least one thing that could be read respectably, then we wouldn’t have a club journal. If we made everything too original, then the readers will run away.”

This girl, she seems to be planning to go right on to changing the Literature Club journal into a periodical. The urgent thing right now is to fight the Student Council President’s plot until the end. There’s something we have to remember. The SOS Brigade doesn’t come in a package with the Literature Club, and is just living off of it.

“I know that. There isn’t one thing that I have to ask you to teach me, in or out of school. Because I am the Brigade Chief, and you are just a single Brigade Member.”

Haruhi showered me with sharp looks,

“But that’s okay. Yuki’s story has a continuation. Go read the second page.”

I dropped my eyes to the remaining copy paper in my hand, and began reading the article that had been printed with a pretty, *Ming* font that made me think of Nagato’s handwriting.

Nagato Yuki_Untitled 2

Until then, I had never been by myself. I was one of many. I was a part of the set.

My group was bound together like ice, eventually expanded like water, and finally diffused like vapor.

And a single particle of that vapor, was me.

I was able to go anywhere. I went to various places, and saw various things. But I did not learn anything. There was only the act of seeing, for that was the only function allowed me.

For a long interval, I was like that. Time was pointless. All the phenomena in that artificial universe held no significance.

But in time, I found meaning. Proof of my existence.

Matter attracts matter. This is the truth. I was drawn in, because it possessed form.

Light, darkness, contradiction, and common sense. I had encountered, and connected with each one. Those functions were not in me, but perhaps I might not mind having them.

If I were allowed to, I would have them.

As I continue to wait, will those wonders keep on falling?

Those tiniest of wonders.

The second part ended with that.

“Hmm-hmm……”

I twisted my head, as I read it over and over. It was hard to call it horror or fantasy horror, and it didn’t even really feel like a story; if anything, it seemed more like an autobiography. Or maybe her thoughts; it also felt like she had simply listed down whatever words came to her mind.

Nagato’s story, huh…….

As I was reading through it, I thought of something else. No matter what I did, I would never forget anything about that December of last year. And at the heart of that, is the other Nagato. At that time, when Nagato was in the Literature Club, could she have been writing a story? With an outdated computer, all alone inside the clubroom…….

Whatever she was thinking about my silence, and the thoughtful look on my face, Haruhi seized the second sheet of copy paper from my fingers,

"And now for the ending, page three. The more I read it, the less I understand the story. So I'd really like to hear your impressions."

Nagato Yuki_Untitled 3

A black coffin remained in the room. There was nothing else.

Above the coffin in the middle of the dark club room, sat one man.

"Good day."

He said to me. He was smiling.

Good day.

As I kept standing there, a white cloth alighted from behind the man. In the middle of the darkness, the cloth was enveloped by a pale light.

"Pardon my lateness."

The white cloth said. Or rather, the person who was wearing the big, white piece of cloth. Through holes cut out where the eyes would be, black pupils were looking at me.

It seemed like the one inside was a girl. I could tell from her voice.

The man laughed in a low voice.

"The recital has not yet started."

The man did not move from above the coffin.

"There is time, still."

The recital.

I was remembering something. What was I going to present here? Quickly, now. But I could not remember.

“There is time.”

The man said. He was smiling at me. The apparition of the white girl danced around happily.

“We will wait. Until you remember.”

The girl said. I gazed at the black coffin.

There was only one thing; I remembered why I was here.

My place was within the coffin.

I had come from there, and I had come back here so I could return. But the man was sitting on the coffin. As long as he doesn’t leave, I cannot go in.

However, there was nothing in me to present. I wasn’t qualified to join the recital.

The man started singing in a low voice. Synchronizing with the white cloth’s dance.

As long as he doesn’t leave, I cannot go in.

“Hmm. This is pretty disturbing.”

Dropping the third page on my desk, I sympathized with Haruhi.

As I’d expected from Nagato, she even writes cryptically. It felt like she had completely ignored the fantasy horror theme, and it turned out more like a poem than a story.

“But it doesn’t look like your ordinary poem.”

As Haruhi piled up the three pages of copy paper, and stuffed them into her bag,

“Hey Kyon. To me, it doesn’t seem like Yuki just wrote this without thinking. Really, it made me feel like it was reflecting Yuki’s inner self. But the ghost and coffin, what do you think those are metaphors for?”

“How should I know.”

I answered, but the truth was, I felt like I was able to read into it on some level, somehow. I don’t think the “I” from the story could be anyone but Nagato. But as for the other characters, the “Ghost Girl”, the “Man”, and the “Apparition Girl”, it seemed like the ghost and the apparition are the same person, but somehow again, the man seemed to be Koizumi, and the girl gives a feeling like Asahina-san. Perhaps she had modeled the characters after people who were nearby at the moment. Haruhi and I may not have come out, but as far as the desire to make an appearance, I was not too self-conscious about it.

“That’s okay, isn’t it?”

I gazed outside the window, and as I looked down at the empty tennis courts,

“It’s a story that Nagato wrote in her own way. Trying to read the author’s inner thoughts from a story, is just troublesome. Such a question is only good for Modern Literature.”

“Oh, well.”

Haruhi also looked out the window. There wasn’t any snow falling out of season, but with eyes that looked as if they were observing flurries, she turned to me, smiling like a spring flower.

“For Yuki’s part, I’m okaying this. Who knows where it will go if I tell her to retake it. Koizumi-kun seems to be doing well in his writing, and Mikuru-chan’s picture book seems to be going as planned.”

That smiling face was transforming from the Brigade Chief to the Editor-in-Chief.

“And then? How about you? I haven’t received your prologue yet, but when are you going to finish?”

I was hoping that she’d forgotten, but I was wrong.

“I’m telling you.”

Haruhi smiled eerily,

“You better write a proper story. Of course, I’ll reject it if it isn’t romantic; no horrors, mysteries, or fairy-tales. And don’t try to deceive me in some strange way.”

I looked around the classroom in search of salvation.

Truth is, I haven’t written a single line. Which should be no surprise. What’ll happen if I don’t write something that looks like a romance story? That question was now running around inside my body faster than my resistance against the influenza virus; I had thought of hiring Taniguchi and Kunikida, fellows who had also not written a single line, as my reinforcements, but my own two friends, who had kept sneaking peeks this way as they huddled covertly some time ago, averted their eyes together, and at the time when I was crossing myself as it seemed like Haruhi was going to crush the allied troops, the chime that signaled the start of class had rung at last.

So, I was able to avoid the up-and-coming burden for a short time; although I couldn’t totally escape, I had succeeded in putting it off for a good couple of minutes anyway.

But you, about the romance story.

As I pretended to take the period's lessons diligently, I was thinking as deep as a sunken ship that had fallen in the Challenger Deep.

Well now, what to write?

After classes, when I went to the club room to escape Haruhi's manuscript demands,

"How about writing something from your real experiences?"

Koizumi said as his fingers glided over the keyboard of his notebook computer non-stop.

"Has romance ever gotten you all tangled up? If so, it would be practical to just write it as it is, and stick to declaring that it's fiction. I recommend that you write it in first-person perspective. In your case, it shouldn't be a problem to transform your usual thinking into writing."

"Is that sarcasm?"

I replied negligently, before I turned my eyes back to work gazing at the screen saver being displayed on the notebook computer screen.

The club room had become a place of temporary repose. The reason being, Haruhi was not at her desk.

Haruhi, who had been planning on waging total war with the Student Council, displayed such shrewdness that I wanted to attach "Demon" to a portion of the "Editor-in-Chief" arm band, and was now running around here and there.

Her very first targets were the nearby classmates, Taniguchi and Kunikida. As soon as homeroom ended, Haruhi swiftly captured Taniguchi who had thought of escaping from the classroom, and with "I'm going home" and "You can't go home" the rebellion was unfurled, and with Kunikida, who had been watching the failed getaway, also in hand, she forcibly sat them down, and then pushed a sheaf of blank loose-leaf paper in front of them as she made a declaration.

"There will be no going home until you finish writing!"

With her face looking strangely delighted, what was it, I don't know if she'd woken up to a new hobby of inflicting pain.

Taniguchi kept pouting and complaining, while Kunikida slowly shook his head as he grasped his mechanical pencil. Though Kunikida was somewhat composed, Taniguchi looked seriously annoyed, and I could see that everything Haruhi was doing was leading him to missing the bus ride to heaven in the future, so to speak. I know the feeling. If they didn't immediately write an interesting essay as Haruhi had said she was expecting, they couldn't even think of escaping.

“Just what is this interesting days essay, anyway?” Taniguchi said.

“Kyon, your days are probably all interesting. You should be the one to write this.”

No way. I’m already full up with my own work.

“Suzumiya-san, isn’t twelve parts too much for a column?” Kunikida leisurely said, “Can’t we go with five parts at most? English, Math, Classics, Chemistry, and Physics are my specialties, but I’m poor at Biology, Japanese History, and Civics.”

That many specialties is plenty, so I’ll also be anticipating your manuscript. Twelve columns of Subject-by-Subject-Study-Aids. If these are really helpful, there’s nothing I’d want to read more.

Haruhi said to the captive twosome,

“I’ll be back in one hour. If you have nothing at that time…… You understand, don’t you?”

After making the clear threat, she dashed out of the classroom. She must be busy with other things, this Editor-in-Chief of ours.

On the other hand, I have to add that there were also people with free time who had willingly accepted Haruhi’s writing commissions.

One of those people, needless to say, is Tsuruya-san. The upper-classman who was, perhaps, as skillful in everything as Haruhi,

“You okay to write something?”

At Haruhi’s abstract request, she readily and quickly gave her consent,

“When’s the deadline? Okay, I’ll make sure to finish by then! Wahaha, how interesting!”

She answered with a smile. Just what is she planning on writing?

, something totally unfamiliar to me, before coming back. For some reason, everyone in the Computer Club, from the President and below, seemed to be fairly eager. Incidentally, since I haven’t played any legitimate games on the computer, I wasn’t interested one bit.」Complete Reviews of the Latest Computer Games ・The Game-Breaking Primer」And there was another person, or should I say, a group of persons. The Computer Research Club. In addition to the course of the fixed computer game war, they had also called on Nagato now and then, and the original Brigade Chief, who had leapt into the Computer Club that she had completely changed into the SOS Brigade Second Branch in typical Haruhi fashion, got their definite promise to write a

Haruhi's work did not end with that. Haruhi had thought of making the cover of the club journal a little better, so she took off on foot to the Art Club, asked who the best, most expert club member was at drawing, and coerced a one-page drawing from that person, and since it wasn't flowery enough with only text, she had thought that an illustration was also necessary, and she placed a rush order with the Manga Club. I thought it was just too much trouble, but unfortunately, since I wasn't synchronized with how much other people were troubled, I left Taniguchi and Kunikida in the classroom, and headed for the club room.

Haruhi's figure was nowhere in the club room. She must still be running around school for the aforementioned reasons, and although I should feel greatly relieved by that, the time I spend staring at the screen saver is far from relaxing.

"Hnn, hnn."

Sitting at the table with a grim expression on her face, was the rare sight of Asahina-san in her sailor uniform.

At this time, Asahina-san's chic picture book fairy-tale was not yet finished, so all I can see was her figure leaning her head over the table as she moved her pencil over the paper, and I had to become the tea server myself.

Beside her, Nagato was maintaining her usual air. Around that figure, who looked like an avid reader type with a hard-cover book open before her, the sense of a finished task was drifting about.

"……"

With the three-page short short that she had submitted to Haruhi, it was judged that her own duties were concluded, and she had completely returned to being the Nagato of before. The invisible aura she had formerly displayed in the Student Council room seemed like it was just a lie.

And if it were a lie, I must honestly confess that I'd be lying if I said I wouldn't be worried by such a Nagato. What feelings did Nagato have when she wrote such a strange pseudo-story, or wasn't she thinking anything by letting Haruhi see it, or how I wished she would make an author's note on just what kind of story it was; there were many questions I wanted to ask her, but rather than talk about it in front of Asahina-san and Koizumi, I'll just have to wait.

When it's just the two of us, I'll grab the chance.

I took my eyes off the Literature Club member who was in her Normal Mode as she expressionlessly read a book. There were only two computers running on the table. Like its owner's lips, the notebook computer in front of Nagato had its lid shut like a shellfish and had been put away to the side.

If I could, I wanted to do that, too. My body, which was feeling remorse for wasting the Earth's limited resources, should just immediately turn off the switch of the computer that had been given to me. Powered up as it was, it was just a waste of energy, and while I was at it, I wanted to turn off the switch to my head and go into a deep sleep at once.

I was giving a sigh as I was thinking all of that, when Koizumi chimed in.

"There's no need to think about it so deeply. You should just write the facts."

It must be easy for you to put what's already in your head to writing, but I can't think up something from scratch. Tell me about your romantic experiences, will you. I could write a lovely story with you as the leading part.

"I'd rather hold off on that."

Koizumi rested his touch-typing hands, and turned to me with a questioning smile. And with a soft voice,

"You really have nothing? In all your life up till now, to be a captive of love, and to go out with a girl? No, maybe not this first year of high school――since you can't write about that, how about something from before? What about middle school?"

As I looked up at the ceiling and consulted my past memories, Koizumi's voice grew softer and softer,

"Do you remember what I told you during the grass-lot baseball tournament?"

How could I, you're a bastard who talks about a lot of things. I won't even try to keep your lines memorized in detail.

"Since Suzumiya-san desired it, you became the fourth batter; I think you remember our chat about that."

I looked suspiciously at Koizumi's gentleman-like smile. That again?

"Yes, that again. In short, your drawing of the lot for the romance story was not by chance."

I, too, have long been doubtful of the odds in lotteries. I know that you can make someone draw a particular lot even if you're not a magician.

I glanced at Nagato; she didn't seem to be particularly listening. And Asahina-san looked like she was doing her best to make friends with the pencil and the eraser.

"That is to say, I think Suzumiya-san wants to know about your previous romantic patterns. And so, she had made one of the genres a romance story. An unreservedly romantic experience――since she's never had one, Suzumiya-san had expressed some hesitation."

Just where is there anything like hesitation within her? She's the kind of person who just bowls you over without any restraint or greeting.

Koizumi smiled lightly,

"It's in that part of her that we call the heart. Yes, Suzumiya-san looks like a person who knows exactly where that thin line lies. But it was probably unconscious, and assuming it were, then we can add that her senses are brilliantly keen. In fact, she has never acted like she would step into our hearts with her shoes on. Or at least she's never acted that way to me. Well, on the other hand, I could only go into Suzumiya-san's mind a little bit."

And I've only gone about twice, now that you mention it.

"But I'm still not conceding the line that she is a girl without restraints."

I said; I could offer that much resistance, at least.

"Otherwise, she wouldn't have kicked down the door to enter the Student Council room, or commandeer the Literature Club in the first place. Or made me write such a thing."

"That's okay, isn't it? This is enjoyable work. An activity to protect a small and weak club; high school students making a resistance against the big and powerful Student Council……."

Koizumi had become rather eerie as his refreshing eyes got this distant look in them, before he regained his smile.

"The truth is, I have fantasized about such a school-life. More and more, I am acknowledging Suzumiya-san's divinity, and at times I've felt like I wanted to kneel down and worship her. Because she has granted me my dream."

That was through your own scripting. If you're pulling the other end of the string, then how is that the realization of your dream? But I appreciate the effort.

"Nevertheless, your drawing of that lot was not of my manipulation. Let's go back to what we were talking about before. What I'm saying is, it's easy to understand that Suzumiya-san is hoping you will write something like your philosophy on love. And if I may say so, I'd like to know that as well."

Koizumi, in a bit louder voice,

"From what I've happened to hear, wasn't there a girl you were close to in Middle School? How about something like that episode?"

So you keep saying. But there's totally no such story.

As I narrowed the space between my eyebrows, and rubbed it with my fingers, I stole a glance at the faces of the other two people in the clubroom.

Asahina-san was focusing all of her heart at working on her illustrated fairy-tale, and it didn't look like our conversation was reaching her ears.

As for Nagato――――,

Though she also seemed to be concentrating all of her optic nerves on reading, I couldn't be sure about the sensitivity of her ears, and besides that, I really don't think it's possible to hide something from Nagato no matter how much I lower my voice.

That main thing is, why was I getting this guilty feeling? How did Kunikida, Nakagawa, and all my other classmates in middle school come to such a strange misunderstanding all together? It's nothing short of a mystery.

"At any rate, I don't plan on writing that story, either."

I declared. To that bastard whose eyes were smiling in amusement in particular――――hey Koizumi, what's with the knowing look? Because it's all wrong. And it isn't because it's something I forgot from the past, either. It's a real meaningless story, anyway.

"Let's leave it at that, then."

Though what he said irritated me, Koizumi went on and gave a new suggestion without stopping.

"So please, hurry up and recall one thing from your memories that you could write about. Just how many of those could there be? Somebody you dated somewhere, or a confession from someone."

None.

I was about to say, but I stopped with my mouth half-open. Seeing that, Koizumi's smile grew wider.

"There is something? Yes, of course there is. Along with Suzumiya-san, it's a story that I want to know, incidentally. Please write about that."

Since when did you become Assistant Editor-in-Chief? You should just be diligent and go novelize the case of Shamisen's disappearance as well. I can decide what I'm going to write by myself.

"Of course, the decision is yours. I'm simply an observer; the most I could say would be an adviser. I just felt like speaking on Suzumiya-san's behalf right now."

Koizumi shrugged his shoulders, finishing up his conversation with me as he turned his fingertips back to his own notebook computer.

I began thinking.

Sorry Koizumi, but you still guessed wrong. Within your imagination, there might've been something about a middle-school-me having truly middle-school-student-like boy-girl relations whirling around, but, though I'm not proud of it, no one has ever confessed to me or anything like that even up to now, and I've never given one, either. My first love was my cousin Nee-chan whom I didn't see for years, but that Nee-chan had ended up eloping with some good-for-nothing guy. Though that was somewhat traumatic, it was also a long time ago.

There have been no confessions, much less any dates.

I gave a sigh as a scene floated on the insides of my eyelids.

It was a scene from about a year before, when the graduation ceremony for middle school was ending, at that period of time just before I came into this school. With not so much as a mosquito's leg of thought that my high school life would be so hectic; it was the carefree, lethargic spring break at the end of middle school.

Originating from the time my little sister brought the telephone receiver to my room, it was a short episode that was barely caught within the cracks of my brain.

After staring up at the ceiling for a while, I lightly snorted my nose and moved my hand to the notebook computer's track pad.

The screen saver flew away somewhere, and the restoration of the text editor that I had been neglecting brought back the white screen.

As I sensed Koizumi making a foppish smile from the side, I tried hitting a key.

Well, I was just breaking in my fingers. When I got bored in the middle of my writing, I immediately deleted the whole paragraph.

Thinking of the task as sifting out gold dust from the deep pool of memory with a sieve, I transmitted the sentences I had composed in my head to my fingertips, and began writing the introduction.

For the time being, let's just do this by feel.

」It was before I entered high school; a time when I was just passing through what remained of the last spring break of middle school……「

It was before I entered high school; a time when I was just passing through what remained of the last spring break of middle school.

Though I had already received my middle school diploma, I still didn't feel like I was going to be a high school student, and if I could, I'd keep that status forever, I remember thinking.

As a result of being sent to private tutoring by my mother since I entered third year, getting through the entrance exams without a hitch was, well, easy enough. However, when I went there for a preliminary inspection before the exams, I thought that having to go up that slope that just went on and on for three years of high school would get really tedious. Come to think of it, in relation to the division of the school districts, I had some good friends in the municipal next to my neighborhood, but because they'd decided to go to far-away private schools, I felt my feelings of loneliness would worsen whether I liked it or not.

At that time, I had no idea I would be meeting a strange girl as soon as high school started, and never saw my name getting on the member list of some bizarre brigade even in my daydreams, so as I looked back at my middle school days, I was somewhat anxious about the unknowns of high school life, which, in short, is the reason for my eagerness.

And so, I buried that loneliness that had taken over a large part of my heart, kept sleeping lethargically up 'till noon, opened the game tournament that was supposedly the farewell party for the people going on to other high schools, then went on to watch a movie――――which was fun and all, but passing day after day like that got tiresome before long, so, after having brunch, I just idled away that early, pre-April afternoon in my own room like a cow.

After sleeping, waking up, eating, and then lying on my bed to sleep again, the ringing melody of the house phone started up and reached my ears.

Having no extension in my room, I left it for my mom or sister to answer, but a moment later, my sister came into my room carrying the cordless phone.

It felt like she's been doing this for a while now, but whenever she came to me with the phone in her hand, this peculiar feeling would well up inside me.

However, though I might be repeating myself, the me of that time was still pure, and my experience points were overwhelmingly insufficient.

"Kyon-kun, phone~"

My sister gave me a strange smile,

"Who is it?"

"It's a girl~"

My little sister pushed the receiver to me, grinned widely, twirled her body around, and then left my room with a hop, step, and a jump.

Strange. Usually, she wouldn't budge from my room until I drove her out, so why was she in such a hurry?

Anyway, just who could this be? As I scrolled across the main menu in my mind for the face of the girl who could've called me, I pushed the talk button on the receiver.

"Hello?"

A moment passed,

"……Yes. Um……"

It was a girl's voice for sure. However, my search mode didn't finish as I couldn't recognize who it was. But it was a voice I had heard somewhere before.

"It's me. Yoshimura Miyoko. Good afternoon. Are you feeling well right now? You're not busy, are you?"

"Ah-……"

As I started thinking, the scrolling in my head came to a complete stop. It was no surprise that she sounded familiar, since she was someone I had met many times. I just had difficulties realizing it since she had said her full name. It was Yoshimura Miyoko, nicknamed Miyokichi.

"Ah, it's you. Yeah, I'm not busy at all. Too much free time, actually."

"Wonderful."

She said with heartfelt relief, making me feel hesitant. Just what did she want with me?

"Are you free tomorrow? The day after tomorrow is also good. But it won't do if it goes into April. Would you lend me some of your time?"

"Um, you're asking me?" (※1)

"Yes. I'm sorry for saying it so suddenly. Tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow. Are you going to be busy?"

"Not at all. I'm free all day for either one."

"Wonderful."

She let out an honest, whispering voice that once again sounded like it had come from the bottom of her heart,

"I have a favor to ask of you."

Miyoko shifted to a nervous voice in some way, and continued.

"The whole day tomorrow will do. Would you please go out with me?"

As I gazed at the gap in my door to chase after the shadow of my sister who had just left,

"Me?"

"Yes."

"With you?"

"Yes."

Miyoko lowered her voice,

"Just us two. Is this no good?"

"Nope, there's nothing wrong with that."

"Wonderful."

I heard her give an exaggerated sigh of relief again, and with a voice that sounded like she was working hard to restrain her cheerfulness,

"Well then, I'll be looking forward to it."

I could picture Miyoko's figure bowing through the telephone line.

After that, she proposed a time and place for the meeting, worrying about whether they were convenient for me, while I simply said "Got it" and went along,

"I'm sorry. For calling so suddenly."

"It's okay. I wasn't doing anything, anyway."

After responding vaguely to that girl who was modest to the end, I hung up. If I didn't end it right there, I was sure Miyoko would go on giving thank-you's indefinitely. Yoshimura Miyoko, nicknamed Miyokichi, was that kind of girl.

To return the phone to its original location, I exited to the corridor. As soon as I did, I found my sister waiting there while looking giddy for some reason, so I pushed the extension onto her.

“Nyahaha~”

My younger sister laughed out like a fool, waving the receiver around as she went away. As I worried about my little sister’s future, I recalled the calmness of Miyokichi’s voice. (※2)

And then, the next day.

I don’t plan on writing too much about the details. It would be troublesome to say even a single word. This is a story, not an activity report or a ship’s log. Much less my diary or something like that.

Being the writer, I will do whatever I like. I can do that, can’t I?

On that day, as I went to the appointed location, I saw that Miyokochi had arrived earlier and was waiting for me as I walked hurriedly to meet her. When she noticed me, she turned her face towards me and gave me a bow.

“Good morning.”

After greeting me with a very thin voice, she set the sash of her hand bag on her shoulder, and then raised her head, making her ponytail swish around. She was wearing a light blue cardigan over her flower-pattern blouse, and for the bottom, she had on slim, seven-tenths length jeans. It suited her slender figure well.

I gave her a “hey” as something of a return, before I slowly took in the surroundings.

We were in front of the station. This would become familiar when we make customary use of it as the gathering point for the SOS Brigade. However, at this time, it would be several months later before I become attached to that ambiguous brigade, and I had no idea that I would be pushed around by my chin because of a Brigade Chief who would break into this world and reign supreme, so I just gazed normally around the vicinity. There should be no reason to think that there’d be trouble if someone were to see me and a girl meeting as a pair. Wouldn’t you think that way, as well? (※3)

“Um…”

Miyokichi said with a trace of nervousness on her elegant face.

“There’s someplace I want to go to, is that okay?”

“That’s fine.”

So we went. If I didn't plan on going, then I would've just broken it off yesterday through the phone. And there was no reason for me to flatly refuse Miyokichi's request.

"Thank you."

To not make it overly polite, Miyokichi only gave one bow at a time,

"There's a movie that I've been wanting to see."

Of course, she didn't have to worry about it. I'll even buy her tickets.

"There's no need for that. I will pay for myself. Since it was me who had unreasonably asked you to go."

After stating it clearly, she beamed. It was what you would call a smile that knew no impurity. An innocent smile that differed in meaning from my little sister's.

Incidentally, there were no movie theaters in the area. Miyokichi and I turned to the station, bought passes, and took the train. The movie that she wanted to see wasn't in the cinema complex or the big theater; since it was a minor affair of an up-and-comer, it was just out as a small, single-hall preview.

At the intervals when we were being jostled about in the juddering train, she would hold onto the town guide and gaze outside the window the whole time, but she would sometimes remember to look up at my face, and give a quick bow.

It wasn't that we were both totally silent, since we did have our conversations, but I won't write anything about that. We just chatted about random things. I remember talking about what school she would be going to after that spring, and about my little sister. (※4)

It was the same when we arrived at our station and walked to the movie theater. However, it seemed like she was getting a little nervous. That nervousness went on until we arrived at the theater and made it to the front of the ticket counter. (※5)

Though it was almost time for the next showing to begin, the queue for the ticket counter was empty, showing how low the attendance for the film was. After glancing at Miyokichi, I turned to the glass window where an old lady seemed to be idling away,

"Two students please."

I said.

……After writing that much, I lifted my fingers from the keyboard, leaned back on the pipe chair, and stretched out widely.

Because I wasn't that accustomed to it, it can't be helped that my shoulders went stiff. As I turned my head from side to side,

"This is pretty well written, isn't it?"

Koizumi smiled as he interestingly said,

"Please write that way until the end. Though the truth is, I'm happy with just being allowed to read it at all."

You'll regret it, Koizumi. You can bet on it. I've got to say, it won't be something you'd enjoy reading. It'll be far from being a romantic story.

"Nevertheless."

Koizumi said as he picked at the liquid crystal of his notebook computer with his finger,

"I am intrigued by what you have written. The text should contain even a little of what the writer is inside, shouldn't it? The voice that we can hear oozing from between the lines is nothing less than the author's voice. More than Nagato-san or Asahina-san's writings, it is your story that makes me anxious."

There's no need for you to trouble yourself over it. Since when did you start working as something other than Haruhi's mental health expert? Isn't psychoanalyzing me outside of your duties?

"Considering that Suzumiya-san's mental condition changes depending on you, that is something you can't declare unconditionally."

You're a bastard as always.

Dropping out of the exchange with Koizumi, I swept my gaze over the room. Haruhi had not yet returned, while Asahina-san was still in the middle of making her drawings.

"Hnnnn, hnnnn……"

The airy upperclassman, Asahina-san, was turned toward a piece of paper with a bewildered expression on her face, as she childishly grasped her pencil, drew a wobbly line, erased it after a little thought, and then again going,

"Hnnnn."

Without raising her head, she continued working enthusiastically. Although Asahina-san's picture-book style fairy tale has already been introduced, she, at the time, was actually just starting it. Looking at the finished product, you could really say that her efforts were fruitful. It had become a work that was very much in character with Asahina-san.

And accordingly, for the one who had already finished her own work,

"……"

At the end of the table, Nagato was quietly reading a book in her usual spot. After submitting that untitled super-short trilogy, the light-and-slight-as-can-be Literature Club member had completely zoned the cheerfully-skipping-about Haruhi and the groaning Asahina-san and I out, making the effort to read as soundlessly as she could.

If it were up to me, I would at least request some author's notes for Untitled 1, 2, and 3 from Nagato, but I somehow felt like it would be better not to ask for anything; what I should be worrying about right now is the "Romance Story" that I had just started. Though I had busted my gut writing that,

"It's boring. Rejected."

With that single word, I would not have been able to do anything had she summarily tossed them straight into the garbage. However, writing something while thinking about what would please Haruhi would also irritate me. Why can't I just forget about her when it's such a useless thing?

As I was starting to get more and more angry, the refreshing smile came again from the side,

"That's not true, is it?"

It seems like he's rebuking my soliloquy. As Koizumi continued his touch-typing without lifting a finger from the notebook computer,

"If you wrote a document about a past experience, from before you met me or Suzumiya-san, I feel that Suzumiya-san would be interested in reading it."

Being able to write while having a conversation is no mean feat, but how can you be so sure?

"For example."

Koizumi seemed to get somewhat happier,

"Haven't you thought about wanting to know about my past? What I was doing and where I was before I transferred to this school, or what I think about as I pass the days by; don't you feel like getting a glimpse of that?"

as an institution, is something that stimulates my intellectual curiosity even now.⌋Organization⌈Well, you……. If you tell me which one it is, I'd like to hear it. If it's a nonfiction piece about the daily life of an esper, then I'd be jumping with excitement to read it, if I were still a grade school student. What happens within the

“Even if you do get to know it, you will just be disappointed. It won’t be a very interesting episode. As you also know, I am an esper who is restricted by place and time.”

Koizumi went on saying,

“However, it is certain that I pass my ordinary days different from ordinary people. Someday, when things have cooled down, I’ll think about whether I should write my autobiography. If I do write one, I’ll put your name in the dedication.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Is that so? In that case, I would certainly think about giving you a complimentary copy, at least.”

Without answering, I stretched out my hand to ask for tea. The teacup in my hand was already empty. Since Asahina-san was devoted to working on her picture book, I had no choice but to bring in a second cup by myself, and as I stood up to do so,

Bang, the clubroom door opened, letting in the authoritative girl.

“What’s up, everyone? How’s everything going?”

With strangely high tension, Haruhi walked hastily into the clubroom and took her seat at the Brigade Chief’s chair, then after tossing a bundle of paper at her desk, she turned to me with a mysterious light in her eyes.

“Ah, Kyon, if you’re bringing out tea, then get me one too, please. Mikuru-chan is in the middle of her work, and I’d hate to interrupt.”

There was no way I’d awkwardly oppose her like a stinking kid for this. As my little symbol of defiance, I gave a sigh upon hearing her, before I poured hot water into the teapot, filled up Haruhi’s cup and mine with tea, then turned into a temporary waiter as I brought them to the Brigade Chief’s seat.

Haruhi was in a good mood as she took a sip from the teacup,

“What’s this? It’s just hot, light-brown colored water. Change the tea leaves, the tea leaves!”

“You do it. I’m busy.”

Since I was, in fact, busy, this much mutiny should be forgivable, even if the chief would be grateful. You can’t say that serving tea is a higher priority than making the club journal.

“Hmm?”

Haruhi grinned widely,

“You wrote something, did you? Finally? Well done, well done. Just in time for the deadline. It wouldn’t do if we didn’t go into the layout work soon.”

As I sipped on the tea that I had poured myself, I searched for the source of Haruhi’s good mood. For some reason, it seems like the pile of A4 sheets that she had dropped at her desk was the main cause.

“This?”

As Haruhi sharply sniffed out my gaze,

“These are the completed manuscripts. From the people I had commissioned. Everyone really did their best. But since Taniguchi said he couldn’t write no matter what, I gave him an extension until tomorrow. And Kunikida was half-done. They’re diligent, so they should be submitting them tomorrow.”

As she hummed, Haruhi plucked each sheet one by one to check through the manuscript,

“This is the illustration I had requested from the Manga Club, and this one is the rough sketch of the front cover I had requested from the Art Club. And these are from the guys at the Computer Club. It seems like they worked on so many pages. What they wrote was pretty bland, but, well, that’s okay. Their enthusiasm shines through, and if people who understand this read it, they’ll find it interesting, I’m sure.”

Indeed. In short, it seems like she’s found happiness in the steady advancement of the creation of the club journal. Making a tangible thing from nothing, the process as we steadily approach completion, is something that even I find enjoyable. It’s sort of like assembling a plastic model, or being on the path that brings you to the last boss in an RPG. That should be fun. I’ve never been in the situation of a plastic model part or non-player character, myself.

“What are you mumbling about?”

Haruhi gulped up her tea in an instant, and as she toyed with her cup, she showed me a satisfied smile,

“Hurry up and get back to your seat, and like, keep writing. With the outsiders from the Computer Club working hard like this, you’re looking bad with your reputation for goofing-off. By all rights, this is a match we had accepted ourselves, after all.”

Haruhi was in high spirits from having found a rival organization that was formidable. To get her mad, I almost wanted to tell her about the Student Council President’s true character right then. I wanted to talk about it while I had the chance. About the false charge he had set against Nagato being a Literature Club member in the beginning, so that you, being a curious onlooker that had suddenly rushed in from the side, would end up taking leadership somehow. Until you put on that Editor-in-Chief armband.

I glared at Koizumi's profile, and started thinking about what chapter we were on in the confusing plans for Haruhi's boredom. With the lone island definitely being the first, was the jinxed snow mountain the second part? No, wait, there was Kimidori-san's *kamadouma*――――or was that Nagato's?

As I reminisced about that nonsense, a knocking sound echoed in my ear.

"Pardon the interruption."

Opening the door without waiting for a reply, the tall figure invaded the clubroom.

Pi-king――――.

I was probably the only one who heard the sound that was like piano wire being cut by a nipper.

Just like the mid-boss of a shooting game, the Student Council President had suddenly appeared.

And behind him to his side was Kimidori-san.

The President was in diligent mode with his glasses sparkling meaninglessly, and as his eyes slowly traveled the room,

"This clubroom is pretty good. More and more, I'm thinking that it is being wasted on you."

"What did you come here for? Did you come back to get in the way of our work?"

Haruhi switched to bad tempered mode faster than a special effects hero's transformation. Folding her arms as self-importantly as the President, she stayed right in her seat.

The President met Haruhi's murderous look attack head on,

"Think of it as observing the enemy's movements. I have no intentions of becoming your perennial foe and a wall that you'd have to climb over. Though I only came to see the situation, I have a responsibility since I presented the requirements. To confirm whether you were working diligently or not, I had thought about making the rounds. Hmm. From what I've seen, it seems like you've been pretty busy with your work. That's all well and good, but you don't always see the amount of effort translate directly into results. Let's just say that you should never ever neglect your diligence."

Though I wanted to say it myself, the Brigade Chief (presently, the Editor-in-Chief) responded ahead of me.

"Shuddup."

Kyururi. It was like I heard the sound effect for Haruhi's eyes transforming into inverted acute triangles.

“If you came here to be sarcastic, then tough luck. I won’t fire any comebacks at such a weak opening.”

“I don’t have that much free time.”

The President snapped his finger in a forced gesture. Though he looked like he was going to shout “Garçon!” anytime now, the shrewd Student Council President was not calling for a server,

“Kimidori-kun, the things.”

“Yes, Mister President.”

Kimidori-san held up the bundle of booklets she had been carrying in her arms, and advanced gracefully in front of Haruhi.

Turning her eyes back to the pages of the hard-cover she had on her lap, Nagato kept perfectly still.

“……”

While Kimidori-san’s smile widened, giving the impression that she had not even noticed Nagato,

“Here you go. Reference materials.”

She presented the multitude of musty old booklets to Haruhi.

“What’s this?”

Haruhi didn’t hide the annoyance in her face, but since she was someone who would take anything you gave her even if it were cursed, she nevertheless accepted the old booklets, and raised her brows conspicuously.

As the President toyed with his glasses in a cynical gesture,

“Those are journals that the old Literature Club had produced. Use it as a reference as much as you can. Considering how you think up such distinctive theories, there was a likelihood that you would misconstrue what literature, as a word, means. No need to thank me. If you feel any obligation, then turn it towards Kimidori-kun. The one who took the trouble to look around the bookshelves in the archive room was her.”

“Hmm, thanks. Though that doesn’t really make me happy.”

Wearing a face like the feudal lord of Kainokuni who had been given salt even though they weren’t running short, Haruhi dropped the bundle of booklets on the Chief’s desk with a thud, and then, looking like she had found what the messenger’s face was reminding her of for the first time,

“Oh, you……. Eh, you’re in the Student Council?”

“Yes. Just this year.”

Kimidori-san replied gently, gave a bow, and then returned to the Student Council President’s side with graceful steps. Haruhi, like she couldn’t care less,

“How’s your boyfriend doing?”

The boyfriend Haruhi mentioned was no other than the Computer Club President.

“I’m really grateful for that time.”

Kimidori-san’s smile didn’t waver one bit,

“But, we’ve already broken up. Thinking about it now, it feels like we really didn’t have much of a relationship from the start; it’s all a distant memory.”

Even though she had answered in a roundabout way, I had a hunch that I knew the reason. I’m sure the Computer Club President would also agree with me. He wasn’t even aware they were going out. He was only getting punished for checking something like the SOS Brigade site. Well, it was somewhat pitiable, I guess.

“……”

Nagato flipped to the next page of her book.

At that point in time, it felt like Nagato and Kimidori-san were having an Actively-Ignore-the-Other-Person Battle with each other. However, since Nagato was usually like that whoever the other person was, it was probably just me. Most recently, it felt like I had been made to wear strange-colored glasses.

“Hmm, is that so?”

Haruhi made a funny shape with her mouth,

“Well, you’re young. Lots of things happen.”

So you say, but you’re even younger――I had no plan on throwing such a vulgar comeback. Ignorance was the standard here. Besides, Kimidori-san’s real age was probably about the same as Nagato’s. It was doubtful whether she had seniority. Could she have been a second-year student just by chance, I thought.

However, we can’t talk about something like that right now. Judging from Nagato’s response, Kimidori-san was not an enemy. I nonchalantly studied Asahina-san from the corner of my eyes. She had known that Nagato was an alien officer despite her slightness. Her astonishment when

she was first brought here showed that. If I were to sense that she was that worried again, then that would justify the racing of my heart.

However――――.

“Hmm, ah. Err, huh-hmm.”

That lovely upperclassman, in all her fuss as she drew her picture book with all her heart, did not even notice the two intruders that had come into the clubroom, it seems. Should I be admiring her powers of concentration, or should I be worried about how she was steadily getting closer to being the *dojikko*? If it’s the latter, then that’s just the result of Haruhi’s training.

In the time that I was standing there blankly, Haruhi and the President had been trading verbal attacks back and forth.

“It seems like you’ve been working on the story digest.”

The President said with a nihilistic voice.

“But can you really write anything decent?”

“I’ll keep saying it as many times as I need. Tough luck.”

Came Haruhi’s resolute voice.

“I’m not worried one bit.”

Haruhi wore a face that was so full of confidence, I wanted to investigate which wormhole it was all springing from,

“You don’t have to teach us or anything; writing a story is simple. Even this stupid Kyon can do it. Because, most people can write characters, can’t they? If you can write characters, then you can write sentences, and then you can just connect those sentences. You don’t need any special training to write characters. We’re already high school students. So there’s no need for something like practice when you’re making a story. You just have to write.”

The President slid his glasses up,

“I can’t help but admire the optimism of your viewpoint. However, that’s just too childish.”

Though I generally have the same opinion, I wish he was a little more discreet about stirring up Haruhi. Even if that line was assigned to someone like the President, all of us here would have to bask in Haruhi’s burning aura.

Sure enough, Haruhi’s eyebrows rose steadily until they were shaped like sharp knives,

“I don’t know how big you think you are. But! Even if you really were all that, I really hate people who think so high of themselves. And if you act that way even though you’re actually no good, then that’s even worse!”

If it’s a mouth-off, then she’s someone who doesn’t get left behind. The way things stand, it seems like they’ll just fling words at each other indefinitely. At any rate, the President seemed more self-important than Haruhi. Though this was just another performance, acting cool while Haruhi was burning with anger nearby was no small feat. The President, and Kimidori-san, as well.

“Mm. Even if I was not particularly important. You are measuring a human being on whether or not he’s proud, aren’t you? If I had something to be proud of, it would be that I am in this position as the result of a fair election. And so, how did you come to be sitting on that seat? Oh, honorable Brigade Chief?”

As expected, I should tell Koizumi that he’d chosen a real man of talent; this President was the owner of one thick core. A person who could face Haruhi and grandly make sarcastic jabs; there must be no one else in this school but him.

However, Haruhi is the best at being Haruhi. I’m the one who’s saying it, so it’s no mistake.

“There’s no use in provoking me.”

Instead of getting angry, the boss of an illegal organization within the school let loose an ominous smile.

“The Student Council might want to destroy the SOS Brigade at the same time as the Literature Club, but you won’t be able to.”

Haruhi gave me a quick glance. What’s with those eyes?

Her sparkling pupils immediately moved to pierce the President.

“Because I will absolutely not move from here. Do you want me to tell you why?”

“By all means,” the President said.

Haruhi, if her voice were made of microwaves, spoke with a volume that made me feel like it was more efficient than any kind of microwave oven.

“Because this is the SOS Brigade’s clubroom, and the SOS Brigade is mine!”

She said what she had wanted to say, and after having said what he had wanted to say to Haruhi, the President, and Kimidori-san who was accompanying him, left.

“Ooh, how irritating. What did he come here for anyway, that Stupid President.”

Haruhi pouted her lips while grumbling, and flipped through the pages of the old Literature Club journals that Kimidori-san had brought.

Because of Haruhi's war cry, Asahina-san had finally noticed that visitors had come, and though she was about to prepare tea in a panic, it was already too late, but thanks to that, I was finally able to refresh my heart with Asahina-san's delicious tea, and I could make progress with my writing……nope, didn't happen.

For some reason, once my spirit was dampened, I also lost my will. More so, because, of the theme that was decided through lottery, and my own past episode.

But I can't talk about that, either. Haruhi's morale, which had been set ablaze by the President's appearance, had now ended up burning the clubroom up to the ceiling.

"Okay, everyone."

Haruhi opened her mouth like a duck's and said,

"Now that it's come to this, we'll make that Club Journal even if we have to die, and even more, we'll make it so amazing that it'll sell out. We will not spare even one copy, and take down the Student Council. Got it?!"

A Club Journal is something you distribute, not sell, and though I wouldn't mind dying for something like that, even if I don't die for violating the deadline, it seems like I'll be subjected to punishment games until death. Really, even though it's his role, isn't the President overdoing it? And Koizumi too; is this an occasion for you to be wearing such a satisfied smile?

"As for me," Koizumi whispered to me as he usually did. "I am exceedingly satisfied. Because as long as Suzumiya-san's eyes are turned towards routinary occurrences, I can stay outside those spaces of ours."

That's fine by you, I guess. But what happens to me then? I just wish they would forgive us for rushing into a school conflict with the Student Council. Though I knew that the President was just pretending, Haruhi, who didn't know, had no idea what she had just started. Should we be unable to pass the President's conditions for making the club journal this time, Haruhi wouldn't just obediently surrender the clubroom. If I'm going to be besieged in a place like this, I wouldn't want to end up being held responsible for provisions.

"You're thinking about it too much. What we need to focus on right now is completing the club journal. Then it'll happen somehow. If it doesn't――"

In that gently smiling face, a scheming expression suddenly appeared,

"Let's start another scenario. A siege battle; that would also be good."

According to Tsuruya-san's perceptive eyes, the Student Council President gave off a feeling like Shiba Chuutatsu, but for her, I wonder who would be Koizumi's match? Someone like Kuroda Kanbe?

As I was feeling like the lord of Takamatsu Castle when their water supply had been cut off, I prayed that Koizumi, who seemed like he had an aspiration for campus conspiracies, wasn't serious about hatching that scheme.

As it turns out, I was not able to complete my manuscript that day. Since the time the intruders had entered, I wasn't able to progress by even one character.

Fortunately, when Haruhi had finished checking my manuscript so far, she left the clubroom in a rush. Did she think of a new outside source, or did she set off to give out pep talks……?

Haruhi returned just in time as the chime signaling the end of the school day had started, and Nagato closed her book right then in perfect harmony. Like Koizumi, who was making good progress on his writing, and Asahina-san, who was industriously doing her best, I stood up with my bag in hand.

Contrary to my expectations, Haruhi did not tell us to bring our notebook computers home and continue writing there. Though she might have just forgotten because of her seething anger, I was still grateful.

Next year, if a first-year student who wanted to join the Literature Club were to appear, would that person be automatically included in the SOS Brigade――――was what I thought about on the route that everyone takes on the way home from school, as my body was hit by a cold breeze that seemed like it had come down from a mountain, though I was sure it was just the breath of spring, until I arrived at home.

With that, it was after school the next day when I started writing the continuation of my autobiography-like story.

Let's see, how far was I able to write? Ah yes, up to the point where I was buying tickets.

Well then, let's resume from there.

After being admitted without a hitch, Miyokichi and I went to our seats in the middle of the single-hall theater; it was hardly what you would call spacious. Regarding how small the attendance was, the number of people entering was so sparse that it was virtually empty.

As for the kind of movie, it was one of those gory horrors. To be honest, it wasn't a genre that I liked very much, but just for that day, I couldn't help but listen to her wishes. At any rate, her tastes didn't seem to fit her quiet looks. Did she really want to see it that much?

During the show, she turned into an eager movie fan as she showed an appreciation for the screen, but here and there, during the scary scenes that were characteristic of horror films, she meekly gave a little start, turned her face away, and grabbed my arm once, which calmed me down for some reason.

But other than that, her eyes were glued to the images, and she looked so serious that if they were to see her with that much concentration, even the film makers would be satisfied.

At first glance, if I were to reveal my impressions of the film point-blank, it would go something like "This is a B-movie, isn't it?" which is something I couldn't just say. Though I don't think I lost anything by watching it, I didn't gain anything, either. I couldn't even recall learning anything from advanced reviews at all; they must not have done much work on their advertising.

Why could she have picked this movie?

I asked her,

"An actor that I like appears in it."

She replied with a bit of embarrassment.

The ending credits hadn't finished scrolling when the curtains closed, and we exited the theater.

It was past noon by then. Are we also going for lunch somewhere? Just when I was thinking if it was time to go home, she said in a voice that sounded nothing but humble,

"There's a shop that I want to go see, but is that okay with you?"

When I looked at her, she was circling the corner of the open page on her guide book with a red pen. The store was in an area that we could walk to from here.

After I considered it a bit,

"It's decided, then."

I answered, and started walking according to the simple map printed on the magazine page. As silent as ever, she walked diagonally behind me. We must have talked about a few things, but I don't really remember.

After walking for a while, we arrived at a cozy-looking tea shop. Seeing the stylish facade and interior, it seemed like it would take an extraordinary amount of courage for a guy to enter by himself; he'd feel like a fish out of water. I had unconsciously frozen at the front of the store, but when I came to look up at Miyokichi's worried face, it felt natural as I pushed on the manually-opening wooden doors.

As I had expected, most of the customers occupying the store were girls. It was spectacular. For some reason, I felt relieved at how many mixed couples there were.

The waitress who had led us to our seats, looked at Miyokichi and me with a smile, brought glasses of water with a smile, and finally asked for our order with a smile.

After scanning the menu for thirty seconds, I ordered a Neapolitan and an iced coffee, while she got the deluxe cake set. It seems like she had decided on what to order from the beginning, From among the ten types of cake the waitress had brought as samples, she pointed at the Mont Blanc without hesitation.

"You're okay with just the cake set?"

I expectedly asked.

"Won't you still be hungry with just that?"

"No, I'll be okay."

She straightened her back, put her hands on her knees, and said with a tense face.

"I don't eat much."

Was her unexpected response. Maybe because I had been looking at her steadily, she lowered her face. Panicking, I rushed to explain myself, and felt that way until I had succeeded in getting her to smile again. Thinking about it now, I said such embarrassing things that it had made me sweat. It would be useless to write something like, uh, she was totally cute just as she was. But, Miyokichi was indeed a beautiful girl. I would think that about half of the boys in her class must be enamored with her.

Once they had arrived, she took about thirty minutes to nibble on her Mont Blanc and sip her Darjeeling Tea. As for me, I finished my meal quickly; it took just enough time for the ice in my iced coffee to melt.

I had quite some time in my hands, but I still couldn't understand her, and as I threw some random subjects at her, she would just nod or shake her head……. Well, considering it now, I don't think I paid that much attention to it. I was just a bundle of sensitivity back then. And probably all nervous.

I was going to pay for the tea shop bill. But she wouldn't listen, insisting to the end that she would pay for her own share.

"Because I'm the one who wanted to go out today."

She said as her point.

Having finished settling our accounts, we started walking around in the bright sunlight. After the horror movie, and that gorgeous little tea shop, where did she want to go next? Or was it time for her to go home?

"……"

As we strolled, she went silent for a long while. And some time later,

"There is this one last place……"

The place she revealed in a small voice, was my home.

After all of that, I took her back to my home, and with my little sister, who seemed like she had been waiting for us to arrive, the three of us played games together.

"Phew."

Having written that much, I stopped my fingers.

The only other people in the room were Koizumi and Nagato. Haruhi was running around as usual, while Asahina-san went out to the Art Club for a final check on her drawings.

As I scrolled to the beginning of the article I had written, Koizumi's face came into my field of vision from the side.

"Have you written to the end? Or is there more?"

"No idea……"

I answered, but despite what I said, it felt like that was enough. If you think about it, what was the point of writing that stuff so diligently? For the Literature Club's sake, and, by extension, for Nagato's sake――――you could be enthusiastic about that, but it was all just a way for the SOS Brigade to continue keeping this clubroom as its headquarters, and just one part of the plan to alleviate Haruhi's boredom. With Koizumi pulling the strings behind the curtains, the president, who held abuse of authority deep within his gut, was Koizumi's pseudo-puppet. So to speak, this case was just one big roundabout put-up job.

At the same time, I had a feeling that Koizumi was hoping to avoid the second stage turning into all-out war against the Student Council. But mostly, it was Nagato who was at the forefront. I think I would want her to enjoy a peaceful student life as much as she could. I'd like to believe that I'm not the only one whose heart is set at peace when gazing at Nagato quietly reading a book in a corner of that clubroom.

"Well, that's fine, isn't it?"

Setting my jaw, I showed it to Koizumi.

"Before I show it to Haruhi, I want to hear your opinion. So read it."

"Then I shall read it, gladly."

As I looked at the thoroughly-absorbed Koizumi's face, I manipulated my touch pad.

The notebook computers that had been provided to Brigade Members were connected through a LAN, with the desktop computer on the Brigade Chief's desk acting as the server. With a little fiddling around, I was able to initiate the printer that had been placed in a corner of the clubroom, and it began spitting out the printed-on sheets.

A few minutes later.

Koizumi smiled after he finished reading, and made his comments.

"Well, I thought I was the one who was supposed to work on the mystery assignment."

As I had thought, was he able to see it?

"What do you mean?"

I said, feigning ignorance.

"I wasn't intending to write something like a mystery."

Koizumi's smile widened more and more,

"And there's another problem. It also didn't turn out romantic."

If that was the case, then what did I write?

"This is just bragging. About how you went out on a date with a cute girl."

I guess that's how it is if you read it normally. However, Koizumi. You must have noticed something else. In which part did you get suspicious?

"From the beginning. It was obvious, the way you made it. It's impossible to say that it isn't suspicious."

Koizumi set the manuscript in order, picked up a ball pen, and then started putting marks on some sheets. They were ※ marks. That is, he was the one who put in the (※) marks above.

"You're a pretty generous person, aren't you? You put in several clues one after the other. Even the most thickheaded readers should be able to see up to (4※)."

As I kept acting like I didn't know anything, I clicked my tongue, and turned to the side. I thought that by looking at Nagato's unmoving figure, I could calm my heart down. Though my eyes were set at ease, Koizumi dealt a final blow to my ears.

"The way it stands, isn't it missing the conclusion? Therefore, I have a proposal. Why don't you add one or two lines after this? The part that will give out the secret, so to speak. That shouldn't take a lot of work."

As I had thought, it'll be better that way, huh?

I resented having to follow Koizumi's advice, but at that moment, I had felt like I should just listen to him. If it's about psychoanalyzing Haruhi, then this guy's the expert.

But, wait a sec? Why should I be worried about Haruhi's book review? She was the one who had brought up that nonsense about writing a romance story, but the one who actually had to do that nonsense was me, the same as Asahina-san and Nagato. If we're going to assign blame here, it should be on Haruhi, who had arbitrarily taken the position of Editor-in-Chief.

As I gazed at the liquid crystal display, Koizumi let out a chuckle.

"I don't think you have anything to worry about. Since I could recognize, it's unlikely that Suzumiya-san wouldn't. Before you could get to cross-examining……ah."

Koizumi reached into his blazer pocket. It was sounding off like an insect buzzing.

"Excuse me for a sec."

Koizumi pulled out his cell phone and took a glance at the screen,

"It seems I have some minor business to attend to. I'll be stepping out for a bit. No, you can relax. It's just a report I have to make regularly, not one of those cases."

As if to support those words, Koizumi kept a smile on his face as he left the clubroom. Contrary to expectations, could he, himself, be going out to meet some schoolgirl somewhere, in the

shadows? Considering how clever Koizumi is, it wouldn't be strange if he's been doing something so normal in some place we didn't know about.

And so, that left only me and Nagato, who was still immersed in her reading.

Nagato never lifted her face. I felt like I should say something, but I was lost in the middle of my thoughts. Should I just accept it and write in that unnecessary addition?

In that silence, I closed the file for the pseudo-romance story that I had written, and opened up a new text file. A pure white screen was displayed on my monitor.

For the time being, shall we see what I could write? As Koizumi had said, let's finish it in two lines.

I hit the keys with a tak-tak-tak, and since my revision wasn't at all lengthy, I put in the command to print it as it was.

As I gave the sheet of paper that had come out of the printer a thorough look, I had wanted to just go and delete the whole paragraph. This is no good. It'd be embarrassing even if it were a folk-tale.

I folded up the sheet that had ended up becoming my closing page, and stuffed it inside the inner pocket of my uniform's blazer.

Then, at that same moment,

"Taniguchi ran away again. Tomorrow, he'll be writing even if I have to tie him up. You too, Kyon. If you don't complete it soon, the Editor-in-Chief is gonna get angry."

Haruhi had entered the room.

And then my manuscript, which Koizumi had left on top of the table, caught her eye.

No, wait! I pleaded in vain as Haruhi plundered the printed-out sheets with god-like speed. She then sat down in her own desk, and started reading slowly.

My thoughts were split between "Oh god" and "I hope I get a swift death so I can go get myself reincarnated quickly" as I watched our power-mongering Editor-in-Chief's face.

Haruhi was grinning widely at the beginning, turned expressionless somewhere in the middle, though her expression had faded away as she passed through a number of sheets, and when she finished reading the last page, her expression changed again.

Oh my, how unusual. I never knew I had it in me to make Haruhi's jaw drop.

“That’s it?”

I nodded quietly.

Nagato was saying nothing as she kept her eyes fixed on a page of her open book. Asahina-san was out somewhere. Koizumi had left for some reason. There was no human being anywhere who would give Haruhi any unnecessary information.

And so――――.

After dropping my manuscript on her desk, she turned to face me again.

And, she was smiling in a way that I didn’t like. The same way Koizumi did.

“And where’s the conclusion?”

“What conclusion?”

I played dumb.

Haruhi smiled so sweetly that it was eerie,

“There’s no way it ends with that, right? And that Miyokichi girl, what happened to her after that?”

“Who knows, maybe she’s living happily somewhere?”

“Liar! Who are you trying to kid?”

Haruhi joined her hands on Brigade Chief’s desk, and just like that, she jumped over the desk and soared toward me. In no time at all, she had grabbed me by my necktie. That idiotically strong girl; was she trying to choke me?

“If you want me to release you, then start talking! And be honest!”

“What should I be honest about? It’s a story. And a fiction at that. The I that’s written here isn’t me, it’s just a character in the first-person perspective story that I wrote. And so is Miyokichi.”

Haruhi’s smiling face drew closer and closer, and she held my neck with more and more power. This is bad; I really am in danger of suffocating.

“Just you keep lying.”

Haruhi continued in an overly refreshing tone,

“From the beginning, I never thought you could write a whole made-up story. At most, you might’ve been able to transcribe something you remember hearing from someone you know. By my intuition, I can tell that what I read here was based on a true story. And that it’s yours.”

Haruhi’s eyes sparkled glaringly.

“So who’s Miyokichi? What kind of relationship did you have with her?”

As my necktie got tighter and tighter, I finally confessed the truth.

“She occasionally comes to my house and eats dinner before going home.”

“That’s all? Don’t you have something more to say?”

I reflexively checked the chest of my blazer. That action was enough for Haruhi to notice.

“AHA! So you’ve hidden the rest of the manuscript there, huh? Hand it over!”

Just how sharp was her nose? I couldn’t help but feel a sense of admiration. However, just as I was about to speak my words of praise, Haruhi had went on and resorted to force.

As I was struggling, she thrust her right leg between my thighs and executed, as I remembered from somewhere, a brilliant inside leg trip.

“Umph!” I lifelessly raised my voice.

Putting all her weight on my body, Haruhi then pushed me down to the floor. Haruhi rode me like a horse, getting in the mount position. She was trying to slip her hands inside my blazer. But I still resisted somehow.

“Yuki, lend me a hand here! Go grab Kyon’s hands!”

As she said that, Haruhi had started taking my blazer off. Hey hey hey, shouldn’t you be ashamed of yourself!? Is stripping Asahina-san not enough for you, you perverted girl!?

“Hey! Stop it!”

I turned to Nagato as my eyes sought help, but when I confronted her delicately expressionless face, I got the impression that she was puzzling about what she should do.

Before I knew it, Nagato had opened the cover of her computer.

From when was that again? Since she had the skill to hack into the Computer Club’s computer and rewrite their program, peeking into my computer would be an easy victory for her. But, umm, what would she see?

"……"

Nagato didn't help either of us, and just watched over me and Haruhi's ground battle with calm eyes.

And then, after that,

"I'm back――――EHHH!?"

Enter Asahina-san. She sure has perfect timing. Just what was she thinking when she saw me on my back, and then Haruhi on top of me as she continued her reverse sexual harassment,

"I, I'm s,sorry! I didn't see anything! Honest!"

She shouted misguidedly as she ran away.

"……"

While Nagato kept waiting watchfully.

"Didn't you hear what the Editor-in-Chief said? Now, hand it over!"

And Haruhi smiled ferociously.

As Haruhi handled me with both hands while in the guard position, a prayer went out from my heart.

Koizumi, you're the only one I can rely on, now! Hurry back!

About that last sheet that had been printed. Besides being hidden in the inside pocket of my blazer, this was what was written on it.

By the way, Yoshimura Miyoko, nicknamed Miyokichi, was my little sister's classmate, as well as her best friend, and at that time, she was a ten-year-old, fourth-year student in Grade School.

Even one year ago, Miyokichi had such an adult-like appearance, that you wouldn't think she was my little sister's classmate. Her height made me skeptical about how she could be a light eater, her figure was good, the expressions you would suddenly see on her were good, and it was all at such an extent that she looked about as grown-up as Asahina-san. With such un-grade-school-student-like looks, the person at the ticket booth of the movie theater and the part-time ticket collector would probably overlook it.

Though even if they did notice it, it would be a question of whether she would be stopped each time. They'd sell you tickets at the student price even if you don't present your student ID.

The movie that we went to see had received a PG-12 designation due to the Eirin. That is to say, it was required for children younger than twelve to be accompanied by a guardian. I was okay, since I had already turned fifteen.

The problem was Miyokichi. Even though she knew perfectly well that her own appearance couldn't be seen as less than twelve.

However, she couldn't bring herself to go alone. Since her parents were relatively conservative in character, they wouldn't understand a gory, B-grade horror movie, and she'd be told off if she said she wanted to go see it————was the explanation I heard from her.

But the only friend she could invite was my own little sister, whom you couldn't see in anything but early grade school, even up to now. The movie's showing would be for most of that March, and then it ends. She would lose her chance to see it if she didn't hurry.

So she thought through it. Which person could she go together with that they were likely to sell tickets to, normally?

That was me.

I've always been fond of small children from a long time ago, if I do say so myself. With most of my cousins being younger than me, I think it became a habit after being made to look after everyone when we were all gathered in the countryside.

Of course, having to deal with my little sister's friends was an everyday occurrence. Among those was Miyokichi, so she also knew me pretty well.

The big brother of a friend who was always in the house where she often went to play, and a guy who seemed to have a lot of free time during spring break. It turned out that I was someone who came to mind as being in the circle of friends of some fourth graders.

She thought that way as well. On the occasion of that movie, it also comes as a place that would be difficult for a kid to enter alone. And along those lines, she had selected that tea shop. The waitress at that time turned out to be pretty pleasant. It was a shop that a grade schooler standing on her tiptoes would feel awkward to enter alone, and even I, as a Middle School student, still felt nervous in that position. With Miyokichi and me at that tea shop. Even from the eyes of outsiders, we couldn't have been seen as anything but brother and sister.

Currently in fifth grade, and soon to be sixth grade, Miyokichi, Yoshimura Miyoko. If you wait five more years, you just might become a rival for Asahina-san.

Though somewhere, at Haruhi's look, I had stopped talking.

And now, it will be the post-fin from here.

We managed to finish the Club Journal by the deadline. It was just a booklet printed on copy paper that we stuck together with a gigantic, industrial-sized stapler, but as for the content――――removing any bias I may have――――you could say that it was fairly substantial.

Of particular excellence, was the Adventure Story that Tsuruya-san had written. Every single one who read her romp of a short story entitled “Hard Cheese! The Tragedy of Boy N“ had to hold his side in laughter. I, myself, had laughed so hard that tears came out. That there was such an amusing tale in this world――――I had this feeling for a long time after that. The only one who read it and didn’t even move a muscle on her face was Nagato, but that slapstick story in Tsuruya-san’s lively writing style was so funny, that I wondered if even Nagato would secretly read it in her own room and let out a few giggles.

Though I’ve thought about this a little, I felt again that it was true. Could she be some kind of genius? That person.

As for the other SOS Brigade affiliates, there were things like the terrible and uninteresting days essay written by Taniguchi, Kunikida’s trivia-like study column, four-panel comics drawn by someone in the Manga Club; thanks to Haruhi eagerly running everywhere to commission writers and demand manuscripts, it had turned into something that was plenty thick for a Literature Club journal, and though it took some time and effort to bundle and staple each copy, the two hundred copies we prepared sold well in one day without us having to do any advertising. Maybe all of Haruhi’s running around for outsourcing had inadvertently turned into advanced publicity, I thought.

But that Haruhi, after saying “I’m gonna write something, too!” only contributed a short piece aside from the self-important editorial postscript.

Entitled “Save the world by Overloading it with fun: Section One ・A Memo on the Formulae for Looking at Tomorrow,” the article was loaded with figures or symbols which, according to Haruhi’s explanation, are to be considered for the perpetual continuation of the SOS Brigade, and though that just seems like something she would say, I, at least, could not make any sense out of the text.

Order in chaos, is a figure of speech that expresses this uncertainty, and while it carries with it the impression that the contents of Haruhi’s head had just spilled out on it, so to speak――――.

However, what surprised me was how Asahina-san looked like her legs were about to give out after reading that pseudo-article.

“But that’s……. If that was how it was…….”

Since she had looked so shocked and her eyes so wide open that it seemed like those cute pupils of hers would pop out, I asked her why, but Asahina-san replied,

“I can’t talk about it much since it’s classified information, but……”

After giving her refusal,

“This is the central foundation of the time plane theory. In my time period……erm, for people like me, it is the very first thing we learn. But who the originator was and which time it came from, has always been a mystery…… That it would turn out to be Suzumiya-san……”

She was speechless after that. I went along with her and said nothing, although coincidentally, a wild idea had sprung into my mind.

Haruhi would probably be bringing home at least one copy of the club journal we had made. And that club journal, you can’t say that there won’t be any chance it would catch that Hakase-kun-like, bespectacled kid’s eye. Haruhi was that boy’s special tutor, after all. Although Asahina-san and I had already given that Hakase-kun a lot of cues, I guess that wasn’t all of it. Would Haruhi become the root cause, after all? Even if she didn’t, it would probably be a mix of various elements. The number of questions I wanted to ask Asahina-san (big) had just increased by one again.

After completing the distribution of the club journal on that same day, Haruhi purposefully marched to the Student Council room to give that report. And it goes without saying that an aura of pride was flooding from her body.

The Student Council President couldn’t even move his eyebrows at Haruhi’s break in and matching introduction, and as his glasses simply shone,

“A promise is a promise. I will approve the continuation of the Literature Club. However, there is more to be concerned with yet regarding the SOS Brigade’s existence. Do not forget that there is quite some time left on my term of office.”

Leaving us with that crystal-clear parting remark, he turned his back.

Taking that as a declaration of defeat, Haruhi returned triumphantly to the clubroom, and danced victoriously with Asahina-san in front of Nagato as she watched indifferently. Ah well.

At any rate, I’ve told you about that one disturbance as everything ended. After that, there was nothing left but to wait for spring to arrive in full.

As it is, if nothing more were to happen, we would all move on to the next grade. If I had to say, it would probably be about spring break by the time Haruhi perpetrates something for the remaining events.

It’s hard to say if it’s been a long or short year. This is a secret, but I’m putting a circle on one spot of the calendar on April this year. The same day on April as last year’s Opening Ceremony.

Even if somebody were to forget, or even if Haruhi herself didn't remember, I will remember the anniversary of that day without fail.

The day when I first met Haruhi. The day I'm confident I will never forget my whole life.

Provided I don't lose my memory.

Wandering Shadow

The volleyball went down hard on the floor, making a surprisingly melodic ‘Thud~’ before it bounced back up. A loud round of cheers then rang throughout the gym and, as if mimicking the volleyball, bounced off the walls and ceilings and gathered around me.

I was wearing slightly dirty gym clothes, sitting with my hands behind my back and my feet stretched forward. If you were to ask me why was I in such a relaxed pose, the answer is simple. I was merely a spectator, watching the volleyball match before me. And why was I doing this, you ask? Also simple, it’s because I had nothing better to do. Since the school does not permit students leaving with an ‘I have nothing better to do’ excuse, my only option had been to head down here and watch other students play volleyball.

I was sitting in a walkway, complete with handrails, instead of the bleachers, secretly suspecting that it was built for people like me who didn’t want to be in the middle of such an atmosphere. I wasn’t the only one who had dragged his lazy body all the way to this walkway to get away from the crowd though. It seems that there were other people besides me with too much time on their hands.

Sitting beside me is my good friend, Taniguchi.

“The girls in our class sure are athletic.”

From the tone of his voice, it seemed that he wasn’t in awe, but kind of disappointed instead.

“Yeah.”

I uttered this half-hearted response while continuing to watch the ball fly around the court. The opponent began her serve, and the ball traveled in an arc, before being projected upwards by the other side’s setter.

From behind the 3-meter line, a girl clad in gym clothes ran forward, then leapt high into the air. At the apex of her jump, the hitter raised her right arm, and viciously spiked the ball downwards. The angle was perfect, as the ball flew steeply down and landed in the corner of the opponents’ court. A member from the volleyball club, who was acting as a stand-in referee, blew his whistle. A perfect back attack indeed.

Once again, cheers rang throughout the gym.

What a powerful spike. That girl must have been really bored up till now.

“Hey, Kyon, let’s make a bet, which side do you think will win?”

Even though Taniguchi was the one making the suggestion, he didn’t seem enthusiastic at all. It’s a good idea, but the odds are highly stacked against the opposition.

Before Taniguchi could say anything further, I said:

“Class 1-5 will win. I’m sure of it.”

Upon hearing this, Taniguchi immediately shut his mouth, frowning.

“Isn’t that obvious? She’s in our class, you know.”

After returning to earth, the aforementioned hitter turned around, revealing a bright smile full of self-confidence. She wasn’t looking at me though, and even if she had been, her smile was different from the one she usually revealed in the club room. This seemed like more of a, “that was easy, too easy!” kind of smile that she was showing her teammates, who had come running over to congratulate her.

Our class had already reached 15 points. It was a landslide victory.

Just like we predicted, Class 1-5’s Girls Team (A) had managed to sweep through the opposition, and their major scorer, their trump card, was currently buried among her teammates, gently beating her fists upon their open palms.

As she left the court, she suddenly caught sight of the three of us squeezed inside the corridor by the wall. Her footsteps slowed down, as her gaze traveled towards me. I instantly shifted my gaze elsewhere.

She was a super utility player, one who had managed to do anything perfectly. Once she tasted victory, she would only long for more, and that included scoring all the points in this current match.

Ah, there’s no need to try to sound mysterious anymore. This girl, who was currently sitting on the substitute bench drinking the beverages the team had brought, was, without a doubt, Suzumiya Haruhi.

It was now March, and the end of term exams had just ended. Many schools were already making holiday preparations, and that of course included North High. Now normally this would be the time to quietly wait for the school holidays, but apparently someone had suggested “Don’t we have better things to do instead of waiting for time to pass?” As a result, various intramural sports had been planned, and incorporated into the school’s holiday preparations.

Maybe it was done out of the school’s concern for letting students have a break after the end of term exams, but if you ask me, I’d pick longer holidays over intramural sports activities anytime.

In case you’re wondering, this year’s intramural sports event was soccer for the guys and volleyball for the girls. I was originally in my class’s Boys Team (B), but we had been eliminated by Class 1-9 in one of the knockout rounds. I had found myself disliking them even more now, and having Koizumi in that class doesn’t help either. Class 1-9 was a class for those interested in the Science and Mathematics Field, so it was naturally comprised of sharp-witted

know-it-alls who did nothing but study. It would be downright humiliating to lose to them in soccer, all right.

Which is why Taniguchi and I, as well the rest of Class 1-5's boys population were feeling so bad right now.

Having nothing better to do, all of us came down to the gym to support the Girls Team instead.

"Suzumiya-san's really something, isn't she?"

The soft-spoken Kunikida, who was also sitting beside me, said. Thanks to Haruhi's hyper-activeness, Girls Team (A) had managed to advance up the ladder and into their 3rd match, while the Boys Team were scrapped and turned into spectators in their second match.

"Why isn't she in some sports club? Not everyone has such talent like her."

I agree completely with him. If Haruhi had joined the athletics (track and field) club, she would have been able to compete in the nationals right now. The same goes with any kind of sport. She would probably be one of the top athletes after rigorous training. After all, I haven't seen anyone who likes the words "First Place" and "Victory" as much as her.

As I continued to watch another match that was taking place beside the first court, I gave Kunikida my reply.

"That girl has much more important things to do than wasting her youth on things like sports."

Suddenly, I wondered if by any chance Asahina-san or Nagato would be in the gym cheering her along too. Unfortunately, they were nowhere to be seen.

"The SOS Brigade, eh."

Kunikida said through one of his smiles.

"Yea, that seems just like Suzumiya-san. She's never wanted to be an ordinary student ever since she began high school. It's fitting that she'd want to play some weird games with someone like you, Kyon."

I didn't even have the strength to reply.

No matter how you viewed it, my first year was fast drawing to an end. Since there would be no activities after the intramural sports, class time had been shortened. After that would be spring holiday, and when the cherry-blossoms start to bloom, I would be in my second year already.

One thing many worried about was which class would they be sorted into, because it could very well determine how well their future school days would go. I had no bad feelings towards Kunikida or that idiot Taniguchi, so even if I had to be in the same class as them for another year, I definitely wouldn't mind.

As I was deep in my thoughts, Kunikida suddenly arched forward, drawing my attention.

"The next match is about to start, I think."

As I peered downward, I saw Haruhi walking forward like the Team Captain, with her other teammates surrounding her.

Spring would arrive soon, but since this school was situated on top of a mountain, it was still quite cold. Or maybe that was just me, due to receiving my end of term exam results just days ago.

I was pretty pleased myself with those results, but unfortunately it seemed that my mum wasn't. She didn't say it out loud, but from the way she brought home various flyers about tuition centers and cram schools, I could pretty much take a hint. Just the sight of them had made me feel weak in the stomach. My mum had suggested I enter a university, be it a local one or a private one. Okabe-sensei had written the same things on my report card. But give me a break man, it's just too demanding.

Haruhi had spoken to me about the same issue as well. Come to think of it, the only reason my marks weren't hovering dangerously above the dreaded "Pass" line was all thanks to Haruhi. She had specifically become my private tutor, giving me some last-minute "Studying tips" in the club room after school. A few days before the exams, she had slammed an entire stack of reference books and self-made notes on my desk and said:

"I won't let you fail and sit for miserable tuition classes and re-examinations during the holidays! I won't let something so trivial come between you and the SOS Brigade's activities!"

Once she started rambling about Brigade Activities, that girl would hear nothing from anyone else. I had originally wanted to ask her what was my hourly pay for contributing to Brigade Activities, but held back after rationalizing that my entire wallet might be confiscated at the mention of that sentence.

Compared to spending the last few days of school being cooped up in a packed class room being forced by teachers to study, I'd rather sit in the club room and enjoy Asahina-san's tea while playing board games with Koizumi. That was the sole reason why I had asked Haruhi, who had an armband bearing the words "Supreme Instructor" now, to help me with my homework.

Haruhi's method of study was simple, and that was via intuition. She would memorize any questions or topics she deemed important, and likely to appear on the sheet of my question papers. I had a feeling that Haruhi's intuition would be very accurate, so I listened carefully to her while nodding my head, Of course, if I were to ask Nagato, she would probably recite out the

entire question paper for me, complete with the model answers. If I were to ask Koizumi instead, he might use some weird powers to magically whisk the question papers over from the staff room to the club room. Since I possessed no form of ESP, the only thing I could do was study hard.

It would have been better if I could just sit back and do nothing but watch a happy Haruhi, who had specially prepared a teacher's cane and a pair of spectacles to look more like a "Supreme Instructor", waltz around the club room, but I knew that it was impossible. It was for my own good, after all.

I was pretty sure Haruhi wanted to sit behind me again during the next semester, and every so often poke my back with her mechanical pencil and say, "Hey, Kyon, why don't we…" before proceeding to spout out some nonsensical idea that gave no consideration whatsoever to how others or I felt. In order to accomplish that, she had to be in the same class as me next semester, and that would mean having me pass the exams and not get retained for another year. Hence it was only natural that she monitored my grades. Why would she go all the way to do that, you ask? Well that's because she's the multi-talented, SOS Brigade commander after all. It's just like how a commanding officer cannot win a war without soldiers, and how soldiers would be disorganized on the battlefield without a reigning commander. Haruhi would be the commanding officer in question here, giving out various orders, while I would be her loyal soldier, faithfully executing each and every one of them.

That's basically how things went last semester, and I strongly believe that next semester will be the same too. I have a hunch that's also what Haruhi has in mind, and in order to accomplish her goal, she would use any methods, including those out of the bounds of logic. Heck, I might even have to spend my entire life repeating my first year, Groundhog Day style.

I really hoped that nothing like what happened last August would happen again. I'm pretty sure Haruhi doesn't either. At least, that is what I believe.

Why? Do you even need to ask? It's because the creation of the SOS Brigade has given Haruhi many happy and memorable moments, and she wouldn't want those happy memories to go to waste. This I can definitely confirm.

I mean, just look at Haruhi's current state.

I once again looked at the match before me.

Haruhi was leading the volleyball team to victory.

She was attacking savagely, spiking at every chance. And before you ask, let me clarify that I wasn't peeping at her belly that occasionally showed whenever she made a high jump. I was looking at the expression on her face.

When I first met her during the month of April a year ago, she was an individual who completely distanced herself from the class. During that time, all she had was a scowl on her face as she sat

behind me, never smiling, not even once. Upon seeing this, I began chatting with her in order to liven up the atmosphere. Even though she would occasionally reply to my questions, she still kept a sizable distance from her fellow female classmates. Well, not any more now. Even though she didn't have a bunch of really good friends in our class, she had nevertheless warmed up to our classmates, instead of rejecting them like she had before.

It must have been the SOS Brigade's influence. Before she became the eccentric person she was during high school, I believe that she used to be an active, cheerful and playful person. I don't think the SOS Brigade changed Haruhi. Rather, I think it reverted her back to her original self, reawakening her cheerful personality that was covered after she entered junior high.

I don't think I've ever known Haruhi before junior high, seeing that we've never met before. I think I heard something about Haruhi from one of my friends who happened to study in the same junior high school as she did, but I can't really remember.

In the gym, Haruhi was enjoying a game of volleyball with her fellow classmates on the volleyball court. For some reason, I felt as if she was holding herself back. Was that bright, million-watt smile she usually revealed during punishment-games reserved for us brigade members only? It's a shame then, Haruhi. I'm sure everyone would like to see it.

Having successfully performed yet another backcourt attack, Haruhi slammed her fist into one of her teammate's wide opened palms.

The volleyball game then ended, and as so today's school activities came to a close.

Students who had club activities proceeded to head to their respective club rooms, while the others headed home. Being SOS Brigade members, Haruhi and I proceeded to walk to the all too familiar literature club room, with Haruhi looking even more pleased than usual.

There was no doubt Haruhi was pleased after winning the volleyball match, but that was not all. The reason Haruhi looked even more pleased than usual was because she had successfully thwarted the student council's plot in overthrowing the SOS Brigade. Having defeated the student council's president, there was probably nothing that troubled Haruhi anymore, save the promotion to being second year seniors.

Since Koizumi said that anything Haruhi wished for would become true, Nagato, Koizumi and I had come to the conclusion that there was a very big possibility Haruhi wished for all of us to be in the same class. Even though Koizumi was in "Bookworm" class, defying logic was the least of Haruhi's powers. After all, there have been even more logic-defying instances of Haruhi's powers, like for instance Asahina-san shooting laser beams out of her eyes. The main catch was Haruhi didn't know she had such powers. If she did, it would probably be the undoing of the SOS Brigade.

That wasn't the only thing Haruhi didn't know. Haruhi had no idea Nagato had the ability to manipulate data, or that Koizumi could possibly achieve anything with the 'Organization' on his side.

I'm a very positive guy. Even though I would be entering my second year of high school soon, I would still want to sit in front of Haruhi. And I dare say that if the SOS Brigade was disbanded, I would be very sad, as sad as I was when I found out during December that Haruhi had disappeared.

But come to think of it, if the SOS Brigade was really disbanded, that wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing, and I don't think I'll come to mind so much. Because if the SOS Brigade was really disbanded, it would mean that Haruhi's powers had finally calmed down, and just like Koizumi said, that was not a bad thing either. I wonder if this is what they mean by triple-crossing.

It's just —- If that really happened, I think I'll be pretty lonely.

"What's the matter?"

Maybe it's because I had the words "Depressed" plastered all over my face, as the energetic Haruhi looked at me and said:

"You certainly are acting strange today. For a moment you look silly, and all of a sudden you look serious. What's up, face muscle cramps? Or is it due to depression since losing the soccer match? To be honest, you guys are really pathetic."

Well it's not completely my fault. The teams were decided by drawing lots, and all of the athletic guys were selected to join Team A. I had to play the role of Defender for Team B, along with Taniguchi and Kunikida. We had managed to stop the striker by clinging on to him as if our lives depended on it, but I never expected him to pass the ball to Koizumi, who then kicked the ball into the goal. But what a pity. Class 1-9 lost to class 1-6 in the semi-finals. Although this was nothing to be surprised at, I had a feeling that leaving things half-accomplished wasn't Koizumi's style. Perhaps he had lost on purpose?

"What are you mumbling about?"

Haruhi said as she suddenly laughed.

"But since it's Koizumi-kun we're talking about, I can't say that it's totally impossible. Maybe they just wanted to prove you wrong. The only thing you and Taniguchi perceive them as are a bunch of useless book-worms right? In the end you failed to stop them miserably and in the process made fools out of yourselves. What a bunch of morons. Although they are some pretty cocky students in Class 1-9, I don't think that they're that bad as a whole."

As I was recalling the match, I found myself before the club room door, having arrived here before I even knew it. Haruhi wrenched open the door and proudly strode inside. Don't you have any manners at all? And what happened to "knock before you enter"?

"Mikuru-chan~ How did your matches go? Is there any cold tea? I've been playing volleyball ever since this morning, and my throat feels dry, probably due to lack of water."

All the brigade members had already assembled in the club room. Nagato and Koizumi had resumed their usual seats, and Asahina-san had once again donned the maid costume as she stood by the door, holding a tea tray in her hands, looking like some elegant maid. I wonder if she plans on becoming Rembrandt or Ruben's model one day?

"Erm, I'm sorry, there's no cold tea."

Asahina-san frantically apologized, as if she had done something wrong.

"I-I'll cool it down right away by putting it in the fridge… I-Is that okay?"

Now that you mention it, there was really a fridge in this club room. Even though it was only a small one, it was nevertheless enough to stuff in a few cans of carbonated drinks. But since my main purpose of visiting the club room was to savor Asahina-san's tea, the fridge was about as useless as the stove after Christmas.

"There's no need to."

Haruhi generously said.

"Even though it wouldn't take long for it to cool in the freezer, freshly brewed tea is still the best."

Asahina-san swiftly brought Haruhi and me two cups of steaming tea. It seems that her tea-brewing skills have improved yet again. Just as I was thinking whether or not to compliment on her skills, Asahina-san suddenly said:

"Hmm… Cold tea… Should I buy a water cooler next?"

Sometimes I wonder, did Asahina-san bring anything else from the future other than knowledge on tea leaves? Even though she looked like a cute little maid, she was nevertheless a time traveler from the future.

Koizumi was playing Othello all by himself.

"Why bring out this nostalgic relic now?"

I said to Koizumi as I sipped my tea. Come to think of it, this was the first board game to be brought into the club room, and I was the one who brought it.

"It's because the brigade has been around for almost a year now, has it? I was thinking maybe we should go back to where we started."

Even though Koizumi was pretty courteous on the soccer field, he had returned to his original smiling state now. Before I had the chance to answer him, he had removed all the pieces from the Othello board and returned it to its original state back on the table.

Back to where we started, eh?

Even though I haven't lived so long as to look back and reminisce on my past, there was something I've always wanted to say.

I picked up the magnetic Othello board and shot a sideways glance. A year ago, I saw a person's shadow when I entered the club room. That shadow was now sitting in a corner of the club room, quietly reading a book on foreign literature.

"……"

It was Nagato Yuki, silently reading a book in the corner. I clearly remember the one time this alien-made interface revealed any signs of emotions. It was when Asahina-san and I were playing Othello.

Now that you mention it, I don't think I've ever played Othello with Nagato before. I don't think I'd have any chances of winning, though, unless Nagato decided to lose on purpose. Now if my opponent was Koizumi, that'd be another story. Unless Koizumi was also deliberately losing to me all this time.

I had noticed that after plopping herself down on the commander's chair, Haruhi would be silent for a short period of time. First, she would turn on the computer and connect herself to the internet. That was a somewhat daily routine to her. The next thing she would do was access the SOS Brigade's miserable home page. This was the commander's duty, I suppose? Finally, she would begin surfing the Internet for all sorts of weird and unknown stuff. She would also occasionally download freeware from random sites and install them. I have no idea what's on the computer and what's not anymore. If she ran into a problem, Haruhi would simply summon up the Computer Society's President and have him fix things up immediately. Talk about using a tool to its fullest.

On this lazy winter's evening, each and every one of us brigade members felt tired after that silly intramural sports event. All I wanted to do was have my evening pass peacefully.

Playing Othello was not such a bad idea, and Asahina-san's tea was even tastier than usual. It seemed that today would pass in peace too, and soon enough we would be able to head back home.

—- If only that were the case. They say all peaceful days must come to an end some day.

Back to where it all started.

Because someone who had hoped for this happened to barge into the SOS Brigade's club room.

Yes, a client. This time, it wasn't one of our prearranged plans, and I highly doubt it's something Haruhi wished for.

After knocking on the door, our client politely entered our club room. Perhaps it was due to her politeness, I felt as if I was witnessing a sheep enter a tiger's den.

Our client then proceeded to say something that made Haruhi very excited.

"I think there are spirits wandering around my house. Could you please help me investigate the matter?"

"Spirits?"

With eyes sparkling, Haruhi repeated our client's words like a parrot learning to mimic.

"Have they appeared before?"

"Yes."

Our client, Sakanaka-san, said as she nodded.

"There have been plenty of rumors lately about spirits behind everything."

Sakanaka who? I've already forgotten her given name, all I remember is that she's in the same class as Haruhi and me. Sakanaka-san sat on the chair specially reserved for clients, looking anxious as she sipped Asahina-san's tea.

"It's happened just recently, about three days ago. I'm also confused about this matter…"

Sakanaka-san said as she drank her tea. She then stood up and started walking around the club room, looking very much bemused, especially when she approached Asahina-san's costume rack.

I suddenly recalled Haruhi's volleyball match. Standing beside Haruhi, the setter for Girl's Team (A), was this particular girl —- Sakanaka-san.

Truthfully speaking, I had a very vague impression of her in class. The only person of Class 1-5 who stood out the most in my memory was the class representative Asakura Ryouko, who had since transferred to Canada. Since then I have no idea who the class representative was, or if her former position was still vacant. The other people I was familiar with would be Kunikida and Taniguchi. If put in terms of the solar system, Kunikida and Taniguchi would be like what Venus is to Earth, while my other classmates, Sakanaka-san included, would probably be the planet Uranus.

Haruhi, however, was one who did not care about how distant she was from her classmates.

“Please tell me everything you know. Spirits, eh… Spirits… Say Sakanaka-san, you’re sure it’s spirits who are behind everything, right? If that’s true, then it should be time for the SOS Brigade to act!”

From her looks, I was pretty sure she wanted to put on an armband that said “Spirit Detective” and rush straight to the scene of the crime.

“Erm… Wait… Suzumiya-san…”

Sakanaka-san said as she frantically waved her hands.

“I can’t guarantee its really spirits, it’s just something that resembles spirits, that’s all. Or at least that’s what the rumors say… Although I do find that place to be really creepy…”

When Sakanaka-san found the gazes of all five brigade members, Nagato included, focused on her, she quickly lowered her head, and said:

“Erm… Was it right for me to come here…”

“You were absolutely right, Sakanaka-san!”

Haruhi roared.

“Be it ghosts, spirits, specters, wandering souls, whatever. As long as they’re supernaturally related I’ve got no problem with them. I can’t sit still after finding out about this kind of incident!”

You’ve never been able to sit still in the first place.

“Kyon, I would appreciate it if you’d stop interrupting me with your silly side comments. We’re talking about spirits here, spirits! Don’t you want to see one? Or have you already seen one yourself?”

I’ve never seen one, and I sure hope I never do.

Haruhi looked like a kindergartener who had just woken up from her 30 minute nap.

“Unfortunately we can’t depart now. I’ve still got to work out the details.”

I’m sorry but I don’t think there’s much to work out.

Haruhi’s eyes flared up brightly in excitement. I avoided her gaze as I looked at Sakanaka-san who was sitting beside me, opening her mouth as if she had something to say, but abruptly closing it all of a sudden.

Why did Sakanaka-san bring up the subject of spirits just as the term was about to end? Speaking of clients, she would probably be our second client so far, the first being Kimidori-san. After Kimidori-san had given us the trouble of locating the missing Computer Society President, I had tore down our advertising poster and tossed it into the bin. That seemed to have worked, because since then no one had bothered to visit the SOS Brigade. I doubt many even knew of an SOS Brigade anyway. Is that to say Sakanaka-san memorized the contents of the poster before I tore it down? If that was the case I felt sorry for her brain cells, for they could have been used to remember even more useful things.

To my surprise, Sakanaka-san shook her head.

"That's not it. I remembered that I had received something like a flyer for the SOS Brigade some time ago but had forgotten to throw it away on my way home. When I saw the flyer, I suddenly thought that this was the best place to come to."

Sakanaka-san said as she retrieved a piece of paper from her bag. Upon seeing the old and crumpled paper, Asahina-san backed away like a vampire seeing a cross.

"T-t-t-t-that's…."

That was the first ever official flyer of the SOS Brigade, which was actually printed using the school's photocopier.

It was the SOS Brigade's founding principle.

If I'm not mistaken, this is what was written on the flyer:

"We at the SOS Brigade are currently searching for any paranormal activities in this world. Those who have experienced, are experiencing, or feel that they will experience a paranormal event soon are welcome to come seek us. We will try our best to solve your problem…"

This flyer was written by Haruhi, who wished to seek out all the paranormal activities in the world, and distributed by two bunny girls by the school gates.

Oh boy. It seems that the seed Haruhi had planted a year ago had now sprouted and came back to us. And during the end of the school terms, too. Who had wanted such a thing to happen? I didn't scream out "encore". Is this what "back to where we started" meant?

I wonder if Sakanaka-san felt the uneasiness Asahina-san and I radiated, as she too grew uneasy.

"… This is the SOS Brigade, am I right? It's very famous now… From what I've heard, it was Suzumiya-san and you guys who were involved in that scary incident…" [Translator's note: The word used for scary is ambiguous. It could mean "scary incident" or "act of terrorism".]

I'm sorry, Sakanaka-san, but I'm afraid we don't have anyone talented in that field. The only ones we have are a book-loving alien, an esper who likes to deduce and a time traveler that will

greatly soothe your tired eyes. We would probably be more talented in the science fiction field instead. Of course, all of this doesn't apply to good old normal me.

As I sat down quietly without uttering a word, a peculiar expression appeared on Haruhi's face.

"You see, Kyon, someone did bother to read our flyers. How can you say that it's a waste of time now? Maybe we should resort to distributing flyers again in the future."

Honestly. I think that even Haruhi had forgotten about the whole flyer incident as well.

"Well, rest assured, Sakanaka-san! Since we're classmates, I'll solve this for you free of charge!"

Truthfully speaking, Haruhi never once charged anyone who came here. After all, the greatest reward Haruhi could ever expect would to be to come in contact with some paranormal event. As long as a client came to visit our club room, Haruhi would be overjoyed. It was the same with Kimidori-san's kamadouma case as well.

"Spirits eh."

Haruhi said as a smile creased her lips.

"Our goal is to exterminate those evil spirits, but before that, I'll have to know each and every detail regarding them! Oh, and we'll be needing the camera and camcorder too."

Haruhi said to herself, getting excited over a matter all of us brigade members clearly weren't. This wasn't good. If this went on, spirits might really appear… Wait, did Sakanaka-san say spirits?

Ahaha. Those spirits might be nothing more than an optical illusion. If word got out that spirits really did exist, then all the foundations of science that man had spent years to accumulate might very well crumble.

"Erm… I think we'd better wait. I can't really guarantee that spirits really are behind this. Maybe they aren't, but I can't seem to find any other explanation for it…"

Sakanaka-san started to fumble with her words.

"Hey, Haruhi."

I interrupted. Why, you ask? It's because that idiot had already began running towards the equipment closet.

"Calm down, would you? Or at least, hear what Sakanaka-san has to say."

"You're in my way."

Haruhi said as she frustratedly sat back down on the commander's chair, crossing both her arms at the same time. She shot Sakanaka-san and me a look that suggested we should hurry up and finish what we had to say. I ignored her and glanced at Koizumi and Nagato's expressions, which I had not done since Sakanaka-san had entered the clubroom.

I shouldn't have looked.

The two of them looked indistinguishable from normal. Koizumi still wore his trademark, foxy smile, and Nagato didn't display any expression at all, just as usual.

However, they seemed to be taking interest in Sakanaka-san, and for some strange reason, I suddenly felt that the both of them had the same thoughts running in their minds.

—- Spirits? What is she talking about?

That's what I could read from the looks on their faces.

Since we're on the subject of spirits, let me first clarify that I don't believe in ghosts. I had firmly believed that those supernatural shows you'd see on television were no more than cheap entertainment, and were definitely not real.

However, all that I had previously believed in had gone out of the window ever since last year. Do you still have to ask why? It's because I've come into contact with aliens, time travelers, and even an idiotic esper. I've even gone through many paranormal events myself.

Due to this, it would come across as no surprise should spirits, demons or angels suddenly materialize before my eyes one day. But just like I've never had the chance to meet a slider, I've never had a chance to say hello to a wandering spirit either. Seeing that I've never come across any spirits before, it would be useless to worry about them. If they really decided to show themselves before me, I guess that I would have little choice then. However, I was not so desperate as to go searching for them myself. I think all of you should understand the current situation I'm stuck in now, no?

Besides, I'm not the only one stuck in this mess.

"Spirits eh… Hmm…"

Haruhi said as she rubbed her chin, appearing to be in deep thought.

"Erm, about this matter… Well…"

Asahina-san said as she looked suspiciously at our client.

"……"

Nagato was quiet, just as usual.

It was as if all of the brigade members had the same thoughts as I did, be it Nagato, Koizumi, or Asahina-san. At the mentioning of the word “spirit”, all of them became dead serious all of a sudden. Haruhi was obviously the only exception. Asahina-san looked as if she had little idea of what the word spirit truly meant, as she stood there with a blank look on her face. Maybe sometime in the far future, religion will be a thing of the past. That’s too bad, Asahina-san. Maybe I should teach you a thing or two about religion. Well, maybe some time in the future.

Even though I wasn’t a very sociable person, at the very least, Haruhi wasn’t the only person that I spoke to in Class 1-5. I would occasionally chat with Taniguchi, Kunikida and some of my other male classmates. Female classmates, though, were another story altogether. I had almost zero experience in socializing with girls. That is, to put it simply, I rarely talked to any of the girls in my class.

Even after racking every single corner of my brain, I could still not recall any incident where I had talked with Sakanaka-san. But even so, from my observations, Sakanaka-san was one of those girls who rarely talked.

“I first started suspecting the presence of spirits thanks to Rousseau.”

Sakanaka-san said to an attentive Haruhi.

“Rousseau?”

Haruhi frowned upon hearing the name.

“Erm… It’s the name of my dog.”

That’s some way to name a dog.

“Every morning and evening, I would bring Rousseau for a walk along the same path. When my family first got Rousseau, we used to take many different paths, but that was no longer the case. I would now take him for a walk on a fixed route, while taking a stroll at the same time.”

You can skip trivial details like that.

“I’m sorry but could you get straight to the point?”

“Kyon, be quiet.” Haruhi snapped at me as she said: “Please continue, Sakanaka-san.”

“Rousseau used to like the path we would take, but one day…”

Sakanaka-san’s voice grew fainter as she gulped, making it sound as if she was about to dictate a horrifying ghost story.

“About a week ago, Rousseau suddenly refused to take the familiar path. Even though I pulled him along his leash, he would not budge.”

Sakanaka-san demonstrated a pose that I was highly familiar with —- With both her hands clawed tightly on the desk, she resembled Shamisen refusing to get off my bed at night.

“How was it possible for me to not be shocked at his reaction? He had been fine all along, it was only after approaching that place that he started acting weird. The same thing happened the next day, and the day after that, so I had no choice but to change our usual route.”

Sakanaka-san paused and drank a cup of tea.

So that’s what happened. A dog, which happened to share the same name with a famous philosopher, suddenly disliked its original route. What did this have to do with spirits?

Haruhi beat me to that question.

“What about spirits?”

Haruhi asked loudly.

“Erm… That’s why…”

Sakanaka-san said as she lowered her tea cup.

“That’s why I said I’m not sure if it involves spirits. It’s just a rumor I’ve heard lately.”

And where did that spirit rumor originate from?

“Lots of places. Many people keep dogs as pets in my area. I would occasionally meet up with them whenever I took Rousseau for a walk and stop by for a chat. The first time I’ve heard the rumor was when I was talking to Minami-san, who kept two Shar Peis as pets. According to Minami-san, both of her dogs also refused to walk along that path, as if they were troubled by it.”

Could it be something we humans can’t sense?

“Yeah, I think so, because I certainly never felt anything when I passed by.”

We’re getting more and more off topic here. What about spirits?

“Well, you see…”

Sakanaka-san said, as if she was deeply troubled by the incident.

“From that day onwards, all dogs in that area refused to approach that place. Soon, it became a hot topic among dog owners, and it seemed like dogs weren’t the only ones who disliked that place either. There used to be a couple of stray cats in that area, but ever since then, even they have disappeared from there.

All this while, Haruhi was listening very carefully. She would occasionally make random notes with her pencil, as if taking down important clues. But when I took a peek, all I saw were a couple of childish drawings of cats and dogs.

“There must be spirits nearby, that’s why animals do not dare to approach that place. It could be a spirit that only appeared before cats and dogs, but not humans. Am I right?”

“Yes, that’s the case.”

Sakanaka-san said as she nodded her head.

“Oh and there’s another thing that’s been bothering me. I have a friend named Higuchi-san who lives in the same area. She owns a lot of dogs, and I’m friends with each and every one of them.”

Sakanaka-san then used a scary tone as she said:

“This morning, I noticed that she didn’t bring one of her dogs out for a walk. When I asked her, she told me that he had fallen sick last night. She didn’t go into the details, but from what I heard, it seems that he was sent to a vet.”

“So do you think spirits have anything to do with this? Suzumiya-san?”

“Hmm… I’d say there are, but…”

Haruhi crossed her arms, lowered her head, shut her eyes and was soon deep in thought. From the expression on her face, I could roughly guess what she was thinking. “But if that’s all that’s happened, then it’d be too boring. Throwing in spirits to the mix makes things seem more interesting.”

“But from our current situation, I can’t confirm anything yet.”

Hearing Haruhi say something as down-to-earth as that definitely surprised me. But shortly after that, she said:

“However, the possibility of this case involving spirits is very high. Maybe it’s some spirit only dogs or cats can see. That girl – what was her name again? Her dog must have seen the spirit and suffered from major shock. That’s why it fell sick.”

I couldn’t say that I completely disagreed with Haruhi. I had seen Shamisen stare at an empty corner of my room for long periods before, as if looking at something I couldn’t see. But

apparently cats were different from dogs. Even if they really did see a spirit, they wouldn't fall ill. As a cat owner, I think I understand this very well.

As I was thinking about Shamisen, Haruhi suddenly stood up, threatening to kick the chair she was previously sitting on high into the air.

"I've basically understood the situation we're in right now."

The only thing I understand is that there's some place where dogs and cats can't enter.

"That's more than enough. Instead of staying here making pointless deductions, we should hurry to the scene. If we're lucky, we might run into something that apparently drives fear into an animal's heart. It could be a spirit, a ghost, or maybe even a monster!

A monster? Isn't that even scarier than a spirit? Just merely thinking of the various monsters that roamed Europe during the 19th century had made shivers travel up my spine. If it was a wandering spirit we encountered, we could perhaps preach to it and convince it not to harm us in order to be reincarnated into the next life, but if it's monsters or demons we're talking about, then you shouldn't have come here in the first place, Sakanaka-san! What would happen if one of us were to be possessed?

Thinking of this, I suddenly found myself looking at Nagato.

Since the last client we had, Kimidori-san (who was now the student council secretary by the way) was related to Nagato in a way, could Sakanaka-san be related to her too?

I immediately expelled that idea from my mind. That was because Nagato had already put away her book and was keenly listening to Sakanaka-san. On that pale, white face of hers was an expression only I could fathom, something that I was greatly proud of. From what I could tell, Nagato seemed to be in deep thought, meaning that Sakanaka-san's weird spirit-talk was something totally new for her.

I then turned my head suspiciously towards Koizumi. As we locked sights, Koizumi shrugged, and revealed a sort of pained smile on his face, as if asking what I wanted. "It's none of my business" —- That was apparently what Koizumi was trying to say, based on his body language. I felt as if I had begun to understand Koizumi a little more.

The only person left would be someone I needn't look at to know her answer. Asahina-san revealed an expression that plainly said "I know nothing at all". In fact, I doubt if she even knew what we were talking about, or what was going on.

"Well then, everyone,"

Haruhi said energetically.

“Let’s go now, we have a camera… But we lack a ghost trap. Now if only we had some paper strips with Tangut Inscriptions on them…”

“It’s also important to have maps of the area.”

Koizumi added, as he tossed Sakanaka-san a light smile.

“I would like to start a serious investigation on this. Would you mind if I asked for Rousseau’s help in assisting this investigation?”

Seems like he’s also pretty keen on starting this investigation himself.

It would be pointless searching all over the area for suspicious spots. If we did what Koizumi said and have Rousseau lead the way, we would be able to save a lot of time and head straight to our destination.

“Alright.”

Sakanaka-san said as she nodded towards Koizumi’s handsome face.

“I’ll bring him out for a walk then.”

Asahina-san’s eyes bulged as she said:

“Erm, if we’re really going, then I’ll have to change first…”

All this while Asahina-san was furiously gripping on her maid outfit, looking very anxious, as if she was half expecting herself to be dragged out in that outfit if she did not hurry up and change. That made sense, though, as Haruhi would definitely drag her along in that outfit should she get in the way of her investigation.

“Hmm, that’s right Mikuru-chan, you’d better get changed. You can’t be seen in that outfit outside.”

Haruhi had finally made a logical statement.

“Okay.”

Asahina-san said as she revealed a relaxed expression, and proceeded to reach for her hairclip.

If that was so, Koizumi and I would have to leave.

There was no way I’d let Koizumi taste some free eye candy.

As I turned my back and prepared to leave, Haruhi said something shocking.

“Mikuru-chan, you’re not allowed to wear your uniform.”

“Eh?”

Ignoring Asahina-san’s troubled “Eh”, Haruhi strode towards the costume rack, and smiled sadistically as she withdrew an outfit.

“This is it. It’s perfect for spooky occasions like this!”

Haruhi said as she raised a long white-and-red kimono. It was one which reminded me of ancient Japan, and that is to say…

Asahina-san stepped back instinctively.

“T-that’s…”

“A miko outfit. A miko!”

A wicked smile lit up Haruhi’s face. It was a smile that appeared whenever she had one of her brilliant ideas. Thrusting the miko outfit into Asahina-san’s arms, Haruhi said:

“Since we’re going on an exorcising trip, this is the best costume we have. If only I had known earlier, I would have definitely prepared some religious robes. Since we can’t have Mikuru-chan dress up like a nun or monk because it’s too embarrassing, the only choice we have left is to have her dress up as a miko… How’s that, Kyon? I’m not one who would bring in different costumes without considering! Isn’t this costume just perfect for the occasion?”

Even though school was already over, I still felt it was better to discuss whether the maid outfit or the miko one would draw more attention from the students. However, before I had a chance to express my thoughts, Haruhi had already shooed me and Koizumi out of the club room.

The sounds of Haruhi’s glorious shouts, mingled with Asahina-san’s cute yet horrified screams, soon drifted out of the club room.

“Koizumi.”

“Yea? Before you ask, let me first clarify that I don’t think spirits are involved.”

Koizumi said as he brushed his hair, and once again revealed his trademark, fox-like smile.

“So what do you think it is this time?”

“I can’t guarantee anything at this point. All I can do is make educated guesses.”

Ah, whatever. Just spill it.

“From what Sakanaka-san said, there was a place many dogs couldn’t enter. That brings me to my question. What do animals, especially cats and dogs, have that’s superior to us humans?”

“The sense of smell?”

“That is correct. There should be something on that path that dogs do not like, or perhaps something buried there.”

Koizumi tidied his hair once again, and said while smiling:

“The first thing that came into mind would be a gaseous bomb, or something of the sort. Maybe it had fell off an army truck while being shipped to who knows where.”

You moron. If something as sensitive as a bomb could fall off the back of the truck, what was the point of using the truck to transport it in the first place?

“Another possibility would be radioactive materials. However, I have no idea how keen animals are towards radiation.”

Let’s just ignore gas bombs and radioactive substances for a while. I find something like an unexploded bomb to be much easier to believe.

“Hmm, that’s actually possible too. What about this one? Maybe a bear happened to hibernate nearby after coming down from the mountains. Now that it’s going to awaken anytime soon, the dogs are all fleeing in fear…”

Don’t be ridiculous! We don’t even have wild boars nearby, never mind wild bears.

“That’s why,” Koizumi said as he elegantly crossed his arms, “If the only clue we have is that there’s something going on that’s related to smell, it would be possible to formulate all sorts of wild theories. The only way to solve this mystery would to be to gather all the information possible, analyze it with a calm and deductive mind, infer a plausible hypothesis with the help of an imaginative mind, and finally follow the line that your gut tells you to. Only when such procedures come together can we unveil the truth. So for the first step, we have to make sure all the information comes from a reliable source. Do we have all the information needed now? There’s no way to know. That’s why it’s not as easy to solve a mystery as it looks.”

If you want to give your opinions on deducing and inferring, you should go to a research facility. What was the point of bringing it up here? Just like Haruhi said, all we needed to do was head to the scene of the crime, and search for anything suspicious, as simple as that. For all we know, Haruhi might end up digging up something weird, like ancient coins from the Chinese Empire. If that really happened, the archeologists over the world would probably be stumped, so it’s better not to hope for something like that to happen.

To make a long story short, if you want to make any deductions, or as you call them, educated guesses, Koizumi, save them for the next club meeting.

“Finding out the truth via simple logic, that could very well be one of the greatest secrets of deduction. But then again, if the truth could be unveiled that easily, then this case would be far too unentertaining, eh?”

As Koizumi was muttering some complicated-sounding crap again, I felt the door I was leaning on suddenly budge, as it began slanting sideways.

And, as the door opened, an energetic brigade commander tugged a miko version of Asahina-san out to meet us.

“Preparations complete! You look good in that, Mikuru-chan! Any wandering spirit would certainly be shocked right back to the afterlife!”

“Sob……”

Asahina-san lowered her head in embarrassment as she stood out for our viewing pleasure, looking very wobbly. After the Hinamatsuri festival on the 3rd of March, I once again got to see her in such an outfit.

When was that kimono made, I wonder? It was downright similar to those kinds of kimonos used only by shrine maidens, complete with one of those ceremonial staves, and if she performed a miko-mai in this while reciting random incantations, I don’t think evil spirits were the only ones who would descend to the afterlife. Simply put, this outfit was so cute, it was made for the kill.

Behind the both of them was Sakanaka-san, who was frantically saying “Erm… There’s no need to go this far actually…” and Nagato, who was not transparent but who’s existence resembled a spirit. As all of them left the club room, it appeared that all preparations to leave the school were indeed complete.

Are we really going off to exorcise spirits? Asahina-san was forced to become a miko now, and if this part-time miko did indeed wave that exorcising staff around in a miko-mai, I fear that she’d accidentally hit her shoulders with it or something. To all the real priests and exorcists out there, we’re terribly sorry for the humiliation.

Finally, early spring had come. During this season, it was common to exhibit strange behaviors, be it people, cats or dogs.

Theoretically, that is.

Haruhi had a very excited expression on her face as our search began. I felt as if we were going to be dragged into some other strange event again, for the other brigade members Koizumi,

Asahina-san and even Nagato had begun operating individually. Sometimes I wonder if I should actually do something instead of just standing around.

However, I was the only brigade member that wasn't bound to any faction, so the only thing I was capable of doing was standing here and fiddling with my own thoughts.

And come to think of it, the one who was leading us was no more than an ordinary dog-loving female classmate of mine. Based on the story Sakanaka-san had told us, I wondered if spirits would really materialize before our eyes.

If spirits that couldn't be exorcised by Asahina-san's incantations did exist and were really floating all around town, they would have floated all the way into the club room a long time ago. The most important thing was that such a festival for ghosts had yet to appear.

No, wait. I take that back. The most important thing might very well be—-

Something even harder to explain than spirits, who had conveniently not materialized since none of us had even thought about it.

After walking down the steep slope beyond North High, we boarded a train at the train station, switched railways once, and finally took a different train to the area where Sakanaka-san lived. Since it was located in the opposite direction from the train station the SOS Brigade used to meet, I had never been to that area before. All I knew was that it was a high-class residential area.

Since there were plenty of rich businessmen living in the area, it was obvious that Sakanaka-san was pretty rich herself. Her father was the CEO of some large company, while her brother was pursuing a degree in medicine at a famous university. I can't believe that I only noticed I had such a rich classmate at the end of the term.

"It's nothing much actually."

Sakanaka-san said as she clutched her hands humbly on the train.

"My father's only managing a small company, while my brother's studying at a local university."

That is to say that aside from her family being rich, her brother was also a smart guy. I wonder if Sakanaka-san calls her brother "Onii-chan"? I'm beginning to miss that calling now.

An image of my sister smiling popped into my mind. I dismissed it by glancing all around the train.

Since all of us were headed to Sakanaka-san's house, it was natural that the five members of the SOS Brigade, plus one of my classmates, were huddled together in one spot. For some people, six may seem too big a company, but thankfully, there were other students boarding the same

train. Since most of them were girls from Kouyouen High School, we North High students were forced to a corner. But even in a train full of high school students, I felt that we were definitely drawing in too much attention.

"Sob……"

That would be due to Asahina-san sobbing as she tightly held on the handrails. That can't be helped. There was no way a sobbing girl in a miko outfit boarding a public train wouldn't attract any sort of attention.

Asahina-san had once boarded a train in a bunny-girl outfit, and was even forced to run round the shops in that area in the same outfit. That's why I wanted to console her by telling her she was far better off this time. At least she was dressed in a costume that didn't reveal much skin.

"Mikuru-chan, do you know any incantations, spells, verses, or anything of the sort?"

"… Sob… N-no…"

Asahina-san said softly as she lowered her head.

"Well that's to be expected."

Even though she faced an ashamed Asahina-san, Haruhi didn't bother lowering her voice. She certainly didn't care how Asahina-san felt, all right.

"What about you, Yuki? Have you read about anything to do with exorcism in your books before?"

"……"

Nagato was staring at the passing scenery outside the train window when Haruhi asked her. She spent two seconds to briefly shake her head, before resuming her original pose once again.

I had a feeling I knew what Nagato was about to say. It appeared that Haruhi did too, as she said:

"Is that so. Well, I guess it's only natural that no one remembers any spells or incantations. But fortunately for you Mikuru-chan, I happen to recall a small portion of an incantation, so repeat after me…"

What type of incantation are you planning on teaching Asahina-san anyway? If that incantation turns out to be some sort of summoning spell, don't try to blame Asahina-san when something happens. And don't bother looking for me either, as I'll be the first one to run away.

"Don't be stupid."

Haruhi said happily.

“If I did know such a powerful incantation, I would have tried it out ages ago. Now that you mention it, I remember buying a spell book when I was in junior high. Even though I followed everything written on it, nothing happened. So I came to the conclusion that those spell books you buy in shopping districts can’t be genuine.”

“Hmm, I’ve just thought of something fun.”

For a fleeting moment, I pictured a light bulb suddenly lighting up above Haruhi’s head.

“For our next city-wide search, why not head to some old bookstores or antique shops? We’ll be targeting suspicious old shop owners, and asking them to hand out their genuine magic spell books or magical artifacts! If we’re lucky, maybe genies will appear after we give the artifacts a rub!”

If a genie would grant me three wishes and then quietly retreat back into his lamp for another thousand years of slumber, then I might have been interested. Unfortunately, I had a feeling that the genies Haruhi had in mind were those dark sorcerers who were sealed into lamps during ancient times which, upon being released, would proceed to wreak havoc upon the entire Earth. Thinking about this, I was a little uncertain about having Haruhi venture into some old antique store and proceed to give everything around her a rub. All I wished for was for the “old bookstores” and “antiques shops” of Haruhi to quickly close their shops for the day before Haruhi suddenly changed her mind and decided to organize a city search today.

Needless to say, our conversation had already drifted away from “magical incantations” and was now focused on “magical artifacts”.

“Huhuhu~”

As if reading my mind, Koizumi let out one of his “Huhuhu~” laughs. Since he had both of his hands full, he wasn’t able to grab a hold of the handrail and as such wobbled dangerously as the train ran along its tracks. He had his own bag in one hand, and Asahina-san’s in the other. And since we’re on the topic of bags, aside from my own schoolbag which was sitting in my right hand, I had another bag slung over my shoulder. Inside that bag was Asahina-san’s school uniform. Asahina-san needed to change into her school uniform before she went back home, right? If we had left her uniform at school, she would be forced to either wear the miko costume to school or skip school altogether. And since any sane person would choose to skip school, I had no doubt that Asahina-san would too. If that were to happen, what would become of my daily dose of Asahina-san’s tea? What would I drink to quench my dry throat then?

“Relax. I can handle that for you if such a situation ever arises.”

Koizumi said to me, sounding quite relaxed for someone who just offered to shoulder a big responsibility.

“Even though I’m no good at making tea, I have ways to make sure Asahina-san attends school. I can arrange a car to pick her up if you wish.”

Faced with such an offer, all I did was remain silent.

The person driving would most likely be someone from the 'Organization' anyway. Now if it were Arakawa-san, I would have no qualms with it, but if it were Mori-san, whose age remained a well-kept secret, I would feel uneasy about it. Sometimes I wonder if she's Koizumi's superior. If it were someone else from the 'Organization', I would definitely be worried about letting them send Asahina-san to school. Even though they once assisted us during the Asahina Michiru kidnapping incident, I still couldn't bring myself to fully trust them.

Koizumi went "Huhuhu~" again, as he said:

"That's a pity then. And after all the trouble I went of asking Mori-san for help. It seems that I'm going to be a laughingstock at the office again."

The train made a creaking noise, as it shook and slowly decelerated. It seemed that we had reached our destination at last.

Now's not the time to worry about Koizumi's 'Organization', or whatever Haruhi had in mind for our next city-wide search.

It was time to find out what was bothering Sakanaka-san's dog so badly.

After stepping out from the station, all of us proceeded to follow Sakanaka-san as she led us to her house. Although it was located uphill, it wasn't as steep as the mountain leading to North High, and maybe it's just me, but why are the girls here prettier than usual?

Luckily, no one stopped to glare at Asahina-san's miko costume, nor did any police officers take us into custody for suspected kidnap of a shrine maiden. After 15 minutes or so, we finally made it to Sakanaka-san's house.

"Here we are."

After seeing Sakanaka-san casually point at the huge building before us, multiple synonyms of the word "unhappiness" immediately ran through my mind. The building before us was undoubtedly a grand bungalow, and it was painfully obvious that whoever lived in there must have been really rich. The walls, the door, and even the front gate of the three-storey bungalow radiated an aura of superiority, and to top it off, it also had a huge garden in the front yard.

Although it wasn't as wide as Tsuruya-san's traditional-style mansion in terms of land, it nevertheless displayed a sense of modernity and class that even an outsider like me could detect. By the door was the obligatory security company label, and in the huge, roofed garage, two cars were parked. One of them was a locally-made car, and the other was an imported one. By the looks of the garage, it seemed that it could still accommodate a third car. I wonder how much karma I needed to amass before I could be born and raised in a wealthy family like this.

As I was wallowing in my self pity for not being born rich, Sakanaka-san quickly opened the front gate, and beckoned for Haruhi to enter. Haruhi, being her usual self, strode royally into Sakanaka-san's house, as Nagato, Koizumi and Asahina-san followed tightly behind, with me at the rear.

"Please wait a moment."

Sakanaka-san withdrew a set of keys from her bag, and proceeded to open the front door, which, by the way, had three sets of different locks.

"This is so annoying…"

Sakanaka-san said as she began unlocking the door. Could it be that no one was at home? Nah, that can't be it. Sakanaka-san mentioned earlier that her mother was in. It was probably a habit to lock all the doors tightly even though there was someone in then.

"Where's your dog you mentioned earlier?"

"Erm, he'll be here soon."

Sakanaka-san pushed open the doors, as—-

"Woof woof!!"

With a series of excited barks, a small, white furred dog leapt out of the door, and began wagging its tail and playfully nipping at Sakanaka-san's skirt.

"Kyaa~ It's so cute~"

Asahina-san's eyes gleamed as she knelt down and began patting the puppy. The puppy peered at Asahina-san with its small, black eyes and placed its paw upon Asahina-san's hand. It then proceeded to run in circles around the miko-outfit clad Asahina-san. No matter how you look at it, this was one normal puppy, and I bet that there was a certificate somewhere in Sakanaka-san's house that proved that it was a pure breed.

"Rousseau, sit."

Upon hearing its owner's command, Rousseau immediately sat down on all fours. It was clear that this was a well-trained puppy. Asahina-san took this opportunity to once again pat its head.

"Erm… Can I carry him?"

"Why, Sure."

Asahina-san clumsily picked up the puppy and began cradling it in her arms. Rousseau yipped happily and licked Asahina-san on her face. Now if this was the kind of treatment every dog could have, then I wouldn't mind being reincarnated into one during my next lifetime.

"This is Rousseau eh? He looks like one of those battery-operated toys! What kind of dog is it?"

Haruhi said as she patted the little puppy on the head. Even though it was being cradled tightly by Asahina-san, Rousseau still behaved well and remained silent. It seems that it originated from a good breed.

"A Scottish Highlands White Terrier,"

Koizumi responded faster than Sakanaka-san, mentioning a kind of breed that seemed more like a sacred race to me. Revealing a knowledgeable face, Koizumi flashed a charming smile as Sakanaka-san said, "you're pretty knowledgeable," while looking fondly at her own dog, who was cradled in Asahina-san's arms.

"He's cute, isn't he?"

Yup, really cute.

With a coat of thick, snow white fur, and a set of deep black eyes that were almost concealed behind that thick fur, Rousseau looked just like a plush doll all right. Rousseau's upbringing must have resembled that of a noble's, while that tri-colored cat of mine, who was probably lazing off in my room right now having nothing better to do, resembled a peasant. But let's not forget that Shamisen is in a totally different class from him. At the very least, that cat once spoke before.

Nagato was behaving eerily like Shamisen, staring straight at the white terrier, not blinking for a full ten seconds. But after a while, Nagato shifted her glance elsewhere, as if she had lost interest in the dog. Sigh.

"Now hold it right there, Mikuru-chan. Just how long are you planning on hogging him all for yourself? I wanna play with him too, you know?"

Since Haruhi had said so, Asahina-san had no choice but to part with Rousseau. Maybe it was just me, but I noticed that Rousseau seemed to enjoy the spotlight, as he jumped eagerly into Haruhi's arms. Is there a theory that dogs tend to get more excited when surrounded by strangers? Even though Haruhi's method of handling Rousseau was pretty rough compared to the way Asahina-san cradled him, Rousseau didn't even whine. He even wagged his tail furiously, as if enjoying the whole experience.

"You're such a cutie, aren't you, JJ?"

'Hey, Haruhi, stop giving stupid nicknames to other people's dogs' was what I was about to say, when Sakanaka-san beat me to it and said:

“Ahaha~ Suzumiya-san, you’re using the same nickname for him as my father does.”

I was pretty sure Haruhi didn’t like being labeled as sharing the same taste as Sakanaka-san’s dad. However, the look on her face suggested that it didn’t bother her one bit, as she happily carried the puppy, who shared the same name with a certain French philosopher, high in the air.

“So JJ found out something unusual during one of his walks, did he?”

Even though Haruhi was questioning the dog, Rousseau did nothing but simply wag his tail. It was his owner, Sakanaka-san, who replied her question by nodding her head.

“Yeah, that’s the case. Even though I’m not sure how unusual this is, other dogs besides Rousseau have also detected it, and have begun staying away from that area, as if mighty fearful of it. That’s how the rumor of spirits originated.”

Even though I felt that Sakanaka-san and her friend’s guesses seemed kind of farfetched, I had no right to say that out loud, having known time travelers, aliens and espers. Who knows, maybe Sakanaka-san’s spirits did exist, after all.

But come to think of it, Asahina-san, Nagato and Koizumi had physical bodies, and could be seen via the naked eye. Those “things” that only dogs and not humans could detect, were they really spirits?

After that, even though Sakanaka-san invited us for a cup of tea in her house, Haruhi, who was eager to uncover paranormal events, declined. As Sakanaka-san went to get a change of clothes, her mum came out to greet us guests. No matter how I look at it, Sakanaka-san’s mum resembles an elder sister more than a mother, be it in terms of speech, fashion, or gestures. She gave me the impression of a perfect lady.

Sakanaka-san’s mum looked curiously at Asahina-san’s miko outfit, before asking us why had we come here. Upon hearing our explanation, Sakanaka-san’s mum laughed and said, “that girl spoils Rousseau too much. I’m sorry for all the trouble she’s caused.” Haruhi then responded as usual, saying it was no big deal. Being able to speak so politely in front of such a graceful woman, you’re truly great, Haruhi. Me? I was so nervous that I found it hard to even bow, and even felt as if my dirty pair of sneakers would defile their doormat.

Sakanaka-san’s mum then told us that we had to stop by one day as guests, for all the trouble her daughter had put us through. As if on cue, Sakanaka-san finished changing into a casual outfit, and promptly came out to meet us.

“Sorry for the wait.”

After leaving our bags in Sakanaka-san’s house, the six of us plus one dog proceeded to exit the front gate, heading towards the scene of the crime. Was I the only one sighing? I guess so.

For some reason, Haruhi had Rousseau's leash in her hand, as she led the way and sprinted forward.

"Let's go, JJ!"

'Can't you drop that stupid nickname?' I wondered as I began following her sprint. J.J. Rousseau didn't seem to mind that the person holding its leash was a total stranger he had just met less than an hour ago, as he happily ran along with Haruhi.

"Erm, Suzumiya-san, that's not the way! We're supposed to go this way!"

As I saw Sakanaka-san chase after Haruhi, who was laughing all the time, I suddenly wondered: Would the two of them wind up as good friends after all the smoke had cleared?

Sometimes I wonder if dogs have genetic mutations or weird sicknesses that make them like to go for walks. Rousseau was no different, as he joyfully trotted in front of Asahina-san, who was smiling and trying to catch up. Even though her smile was always ravishing, for some reason I felt that her current smile was even more charming than before, a smile that would only appear in a fantasy world.

Now since Haruhi didn't know where to go, she couldn't possibly lead the way, so she had no choice but to hand over Rousseau's leash to Sakanaka-san. All of us followed behind, as if taking a relaxed stroll.

"Which way should we go? Can't you go faster, JJ? Hurry, hurry!"

Haruhi, who was standing right beside Rousseau, ushered him on with her words of encouragement.

"That won't do, Suzumiya-san. We're supposed to go for a walk, not a run."

Sakanaka-san gently replied as she held onto Rousseau's leash.

Nagato was silent, as always, while Koizumi was busy studying a map of the area.

Curious about what Koizumi was doing, I said:

"What's up? Spot anything mysterious on the map?"

In response to my question, Koizumi withdrew a pen from his pocket, and said:

"I'm marking the places dogs do not dare enter. I don't think it'll be necessary for us to go and search every one of them. Just a rough estimation on the map would do."

Oh well, I'll leave this up to you then seeing that you seem to be developing a weird liking for drawing and shapes lately. After seeing Sakanaka-san's dog look so healthy, I'm not worried about anything, even though there are places that dogs really don't dare enter. All I want to do now is enjoy my walk with Rousseau. Speaking of which, I had a sudden urge to keep a dog as a pet. Of course, I didn't expect for one as expensive and as high-classed as Sakanaka-san's. A normal, mixed breed would be enough. It appeared that Haruhi had the same thought in her mind too, as she hopped along with Rousseau like a feisty little bunny, the word 'Spirits' totally driven out of her mind, it seems.

The only one clad in casual clothing was Sakanaka-san. Behind her, four school uniform clad high school students and a miko followed. I wonder what other dogs would think of this, as we followed Sakanaka-san and Rousseau on their everyday path.

Sakanaka-san walked elegantly as she led the way. Is this what she's like in school? Or is this part of her true personality? Based on my calculations, it seemed that we were headed due east, and unless I'm atrociously mistaken, we should wind up near a river soon, the one which had cherry-blossom trees growing by its edges. Riverbanks are really the best places for taking dogs out for walks after all.

As I was busy thinking about trivial, unimportant stuff like those above, Sakanaka-san abruptly stopped.

"He's stopping at the same place again."

I quickly turned to Rousseau. He had all four of his paws planted firmly into the ground, and no matter how hard Sakanaka-san tried to pull him along, he wouldn't budge an inch.

Aww~ was what his owner said, apparently disappointed. I believe everyone present felt the same too.

"Huh?"

Haruhi said as her eyes bulged wide, apparently remembering what we were truly here for.

"I don't see anything suspicious."

Even though we were in the middle of a residential area, due to the fact that we were approaching the riverbank, there were more trees growing here. I could see a huge mountain in the distance. From what I've heard, even though wild bears have yet to appear, there were sightings of a wild boar once, in this area. But if that was true, why hadn't I heard about it before? I had frequented the riverbank often, and to top it off, this place was situated near the train station. If wild boars were really sighted, wouldn't it have caused some sort of ruckus? Why didn't I know anything about it till now?

Sakanaka-san was still holding on to Rousseau's leash, even though it was clearly obvious he wasn't going to go in any further.

“He’s always been fine with this path, right until one week ago. We would go up the stairs, walk along the riverbank, make a huge U-turn, and come back here, before back-tracking all the way back home. We’ve been using the same route for as long as I can remember. It all started a week ago, when Rousseau suddenly refused to budge, just like he is now.”

Asahina-san squatted down and began scratching behind Rousseau’s ears. Upon seeing this, Haruhi began tugging upon her own ear.

“That river seems mighty suspicious. Maybe someone dumped toxic waste into it! I wonder if there’s a factory further upstream.”

How did you come up with such an idea? We North High students should know that there was no such thing, because if we followed this river upstream, we would end up walking along the familiar path to school. And since I’ve been walking up that darned path for a whole year now, I know that there’s nothing there but trees. There’s not even a restaurant along the hill, never mind a factory.

“Nope,” Sakanaka-san said. “Rousseau has no qualms about going further upstream or further downstream. It’s just this specific spot that troubles him. The same goes with Higuchi-san and Minami-san.”

“I see.”

Haruhi silently observed Rousseau while he keenly licked Asahina-san. Without warning, she suddenly sprang like a flash of lightning at Rousseau, and proceeded to pick him up in her arms.

“If that’s the case, JJ, let’s have you first bring us to this suspicious spot! When we reach that specific spot, bark loudly twice to let us know!”

Haruhi took Rousseau’s leash from Sakanaka-san’s hand, before proceeding to drag Rousseau along. But the distance she managed to cover was probably as short as the leash in her hand, because Rousseau started to howl pitifully the moment Haruhi began dragging him along.

Hearing Rousseau howl like that, Sakanaka-san stood still, as if fixed to the spot. She had a pained expression on her face, which resembled the one Rousseau had too. It was pretty obvious that she didn’t want to see her beloved dog in such a condition.

“I don’t want Rousseau to be mad at me.”

Sakanaka-san said as she took the leash from Haruhi’s hands, before proceeding to comfort Rousseau by slowly patting his head.

“I’ve heard stories of dogs being mad at their owners. When a cold war erupts between a dog and its owner, the dog would inevitably feel rejected, and soon die of a broken heart. If that were to happen, I don’t know how I would continue to live on. So…”

Sakanaka-san is really a dog lover, to say the least. No matter how you look at it, she has clearly pampered Rousseau. If I brought Shamisen to her house for one night, I'm sure it would resemble Heaven for him.

Even Haruhi had nothing to say. All she could do was to look at Sakanaka-san with her mouth opened wide. Asahina-san, on the other hand, seemed to agree with what Sakanaka-san had said, as she furiously nodded her head. I really envy you, Rousseau. To think that you managed to win Asahina-san's heart in such a short period of time!

"We can't drag him to somewhere he isn't willing to go."

Koizumi said as he opened his map wide, and proceeded to say:

"This is where we currently are."

Using a red pen, Koizumi made a small mark on the map.

"This is the exact spot that dogs start to sense danger. Even if we were to move along this path, I believe that Rousseau would feel uneasy all the way. In other words, he isn't afraid of a specific spot but rather, a specific area. We won't be able to pinpoint anything even if we were to venture further forward."

So what are you suggesting?

Just as I was about to open my mouth to ask, Koizumi smiled warmly and said:

"Let's head back for the time being, and have Rousseau enjoy a stroll on another path."

We ended up following Koizumi's suggestion, and backtracked all the way to the crossroads. From there, we proceeded to the left, due north. Since we were fast approaching the train station, the crowd was thicker, but apparently Asahina-san was more worried about Rousseau than about her outfit, as she totally ignored the stares of the crowd.

Koizumi was leading the way, something he rarely had a chance to, with his map in his hands, his elegant smile ever present on that smooth face of his.

"We should head here next."

Taking a turn, we now found ourselves moving east, as we continued to follow Koizumi's lead.

After five minutes or so…

"Auu~"

Rousseau abruptly stopped and refused to continue forward.

“So it’s really that river eh.”

Looking in the direction Haruhi was pointing, we found ourselves once again gazing at the river bank and cherry-blossom trees.

After confirming our exact location based on a couple of signboards and number plates, Koizumi once again marked another spot on the map.

“I think I get it now, but just in case, can we go to yet another place?”

I’ve got no idea what Koizumi has figured out, and so I just silently follow him, walking northwards. Fortunately, we didn’t have to backtrack this time, because Koizumi had conveniently chosen a place that could be reached via a couple of back lanes and alleyways. If we continued in this direction, I knew that we would soon reach the sea. However, I personally feel that the sea is far too much of an exaggeration, and I doubt Koizumi had the patience to track all the way towards the ocean.

After about 5 minutes, Koizumi turned east, and we continued walking along the new path.

3 minutes later,

“Auu~”

Rousseau stopped for the third time, and howled pitifully again. Seeing the doll-like Rousseau howl like that, even I felt troubled. Sakanaka-san immediately rushed forward to pick him up. I understood her feelings perfectly, and even my heart was swayed by her actions.

Asahina-san looked as if she was about to cry, while Nagato looked indifferent than usual. Koizumi, however, revealed a very confident smile, as if he had understood everything, and said:

“I see.”

Placing a final mark on his map, Koizumi turned towards us, as if ready to announce that it was time for us to do battle. Even though I knew that what he was about to say couldn’t be good news, I still found myself unable to ignore him.

“So what’s happening?”

I wanted to know the truth behind everything. It was as simple as that. Even though I wanted to totally ignore what he wanted to say, I found my curiosity getting the better of me. There! I said it! So hurry up and tell us what you know!

“Take a look at this map.”

As if on cue, all of us peered at the map in Koizumi's hands.

"These red marks indicate the specific spots Rousseau refused to ventured further within. There are a total of three spots, our current location included. For simplicity's sake, I'll name them A, B and C, with A being our first location and C being our current. Studying the three dots, do any of you find anything odd about them?"

Huh? Are you trying to give us after-lesson classes or something?

I had already given up on anything beyond my basic curriculum, and thus refused to answer his question. Haruhi, on the other hand, immediately answered without first raising her hand.

"If measured in a straight line, the distance between A, B and C are the same."

"You're sharp, Suzumiya-san. That was the reason why I had us go along these routes."

Koizumi said happily, just like a teacher getting a perfect answer from one of his students.

"What's important is that these points do not seem odd if viewed individually, especially point B. No matter how you look at it, it seems like a regular point. However, if I connect them like this…"

Koizumi once again took out his red marker, and began drawing on the map. With B as the center point, Koizumi traced an arc from A to C, making a small ripple form on the surface of this 1: 10000 scale map.

"Oh I see."

Haruhi came to a conclusion before anyone else could.

"Kyon, don't you get it? What does this curve look like?"

What would a curve look like other than a curve?

"That's why you're so bad in math! You have to use your intuition sometimes! Lend me that for a while, okay? Koizumi-kun."

Using the red marker she had just acquired from Koizumi, Haruhi began drawing on the map.

"If we extend this curve, while maintaining its original angle, and join them together, we'll get a perfect circle, no?"

You've got a point there. The shape that Haruhi had just traced did resemble a perfect circle.

Just like those circles you see indicating buried treasure in treasure maps.

I finally understood. So that's what this is all about?

"In other words, dogs are unable to enter this circle, right?"

"That's merely my speculation."

If that area is really shaped like a circle, then the places dogs dare not approach should be the ones outlined in this map. Even though we can't conclude if this is caused by spirits or has some material cause, at least we can confirm which areas they dare not enter."

Koizumi pointed at the circle he had just created with Haruhi.

"If there really is something behind this, then it should be somewhere in this area. And the most suspicious point would be the center of the circle. Since I only used these three points as reference, I can't really say where the center is, but I think I'll be able to make an educated guess. The center of the circle should be located—-"

Before Koizumi could point out the location, Haruhi had already beaten him to it, as she used the tip of the marker to pinpoint the exact location.

"It's really the river, after all."

I don't need to hear Haruhi explain any further. The center point of the circle marked on the map should coincide with a very long row of cherry-blossom trees. And opposite those trees would be a bench Asahina-san and I were definitely familiar with.

"Incredible~~"

Sakanaka-san said in awe.

"To think you'd be able to think of such things, Koizumi-kun, you're amazing!"

"It's no big deal, really."

Sakanaka-san has a very impressed look on her face, as she stares at Koizumi's smiling face. Erm, Sakanaka-san, I'd advise you to stay away from this fellow. There's no knowing what's going on in his brain. He also possesses the ability to turn himself into a glowing red orb that could manifest itself at any time. He's just like a mutant!

Even though I wanted to warn Sakanaka-san about this, I found my lips tightly sealed shut, as I quietly studied the map.

I just realized that unless something weird is happening to me, I would find it incredibly hard to travel to that location, as if someone is warning me not to go. I don't need to save yet another

boy from an accident, do I? During that incident, only Asahina-san and I were present. This time, however, the SOS Brigade is fully assembled. Even if something were to happen, I'm sure at least someone would lend me a hand, right?

Especially so, since the all-important Brigade Commander is here!

"Let's go."

Haruhi said, appearing cheerful.

"Let's head for this suspicious place then! Rest assured, Sakanaka-san, JJ! After we take some pictures of the spirits, I'll be sure to exorcise them for good!"

"E-exorcise?"

As if finally realizing what outfit she's wearing, Asahina-san wrapped both her arms around her shoulders, and began trembling. Haruhi grabbed her wrist, and said,

"This is an emergency! We shall head out now!"

With that, Haruhi began dragging Asahina-san, proceeding towards the river.

Thanks to Haruhi's 'this is an emergency!' all of us got to the riverbank relatively fast. According to Koizumi's deductions, the most suspicious place was none other than the riverbank lined with cherry-blossom trees.

Haruhi had already taken the map from Koizumi, and began staring hard at it, as if trying to find the most precise point of the circle. Too bad Haruhi, all your efforts are in vain. I have a feeling that Koizumi already has it calculated in his head.

"Perhaps that's the spot?"

"That side?"

For some reason, if it ever came to it, I would find Koizumi's cool and composed answer more reliable than Haruhi's, who is still busy staring at the map. Could he have found out something suspicious?

Only the 5 members of the SOS Brigade were present. Sakanaka-san and Rousseau were at home, patiently awaiting news from us. In other words, Sakanaka-san had refused to come along with us, stating she couldn't 'let Rousseau go to a place he detested such'. Even if she had tagged along, I doubt that she would have been of much use anyway, so that's why Haruhi and I didn't protest much about her leaving. Of course, I know that I'm one to talk, seeing that I'm just some random guy Haruhi picked to join her Brigade, much like a stand-in comedian somebody got off the streets.

“Mikuru-chan, I’m sorry to keep you waiting. It’s finally your turn to step up on the stage.”

“Y-y-y-yes.”

To Haruhi, Asahina-san was probably the most useful one in this situation. That’s why she had Asahina-san dress up all like that. If we had journeyed all the way here without doing at least something which had connections with spirits, the whole miko outfit would have been a waste.

“B-but w-what am I supposed to do?”

“Just leave it all to me! I’ve done all necessary preparations beforehand! Mikuru-chan, stand over there. And raise your ceremonial staff high too.”

After ordering Asahina-san to stand by the riverbank and raise her ceremonial staff high, Haruhi withdrew a something from her pocket, which was curled into the shape of a cylinder.

“This is it.”

Haruhi said as she put her arm menacingly on Asahina-san’s shoulder.

“Now let’s start the exorcism!”

“Vajrac… chedika?… Prajnapara…mi… ta… Ekasha…ri.”

For a while there I wondered what sort of incantation Haruhi had cooked up. It turned out to be nothing more than a simple Sutra of Wisdom Perfection. However, seeing Asahina-san clad in a miko costume chanting out Buddhist Scriptures made me feel uneasy, as if there were going to be a divine intervention at any moment. But if you think about it, maybe this way would be better. Maybe the combined forces of Shinto and Buddhism would be enough to exorcise the spirits.

After looking at the Sutra Haruhi had written, and at Asahina-san frantically trying to recite the lines, I really feel the need to apologize to all the true priests and shrine maidens in the world. All I can do is silently pray they don’t mind us.

Haruhi played the role of an assistant, as she frantically flashed Asahina-san the different verses.

“Demons be gone… Demons be gone…”

As Asahina-san was trying to recite the verses even though she was a fake miko, I shot a glance at someone I knew who cared very much. I think it goes without explaining who this particular person is, no?

“……”

Nagato's eyes resembled a chime in the night wind, as she gazed at Asahina-san. There was nothing wrong about her. It's just that her eyes were fixed on Asahina-san instead of a book this time.

After seeing this, I was relieved.

I didn't think it was going to be of any use for Asahina-san to continue on chanting like that, since we're not even sure if the whole ruckus is indeed caused by spirits. But one thing I know for sure though, is that be it spirits, paranormal events or things that science can't explain, Nagato was with her, and there is nothing that could escape Nagato's attention. And once Nagato detected something, there was no way I would fail to notice it. Of course Nagato would try to notify me if she had detected anything strange, just like that incident with the kamadouma.

Perhaps she had noticed that I was staring at her, because Nagato suddenly turned her head towards me, as if saying, 'What are you thinking?'

"Nothing."

No bombs, no hibernating bears, no radioactive elements, or any weird titanium rods?

"No."

Not even a trace?

"Nothing I can detect."

Nagato replied in a monotonous voice, as if reciting her times tables.

"No traces of anything paranormal."

Then why were Rousseau and the other dogs afraid of this place? Shouldn't there be something strange or unusual here?

"……"

Like a chime in the wind, Nagato shook her head slightly, as she shifted her gaze behind me.

As if following her lead, I too turned back.

A tall, well-built guy was walking upstream. As he approached us, I shot a glance at him. It's not like he was particularly attractive or anything, it's just that—-

He had a dog with him. A Shiba Inu to be exact. Now under normal circumstances, I wouldn't be surprised. After all, it was just an ordinary Shiba Inu, nothing special about it.

The problem was, wasn't this an area where no dogs dared to enter?

“Huh?”

It seemed that Haruhi had finally noticed, as with Asahina-san too, for she had abruptly stopped chanting the verses. In her shocked state, all she could say was:

“Impossible… How…”

“Hmm.”

With a puzzled look in his eyes, Koizumi eyed the guy walking with his dog.

This Shiba Inu definitely didn’t share the same reaction as Sakanaka-san’s Scottish Highland White Terrier. In fact, it looks happy, as if enjoying this walk with its owner. It was panting steadily as it followed its owner on all fours.

By rough estimation, I’d say the dog’s owner was a university student. He eyed us suspiciously, before continuing on his walk with his dog.

“Wait a second! Wait!”

Haruhi yelled as she jumped forward to block his path.

“I’m sorry, but can I ask you something?”

Haruhi eyed the Shiba Inu with a gaze so terrifying that it would halt anything in its tracks, before saying:

“Can I borrow a bit of your time? Why is your dog able to pass through this area? Because you see… Erm, well… It’s a long story.”

With that said, Haruhi grabbed me by the collar, and dragged me towards the Shiba Inu’s owner. The guy stood there with a bemused look on his face, as if wondering,’who are these people?’ Even the Shiba Inu rolled out its tongue, as if saying that it didn’t understand what was going on. Haruhi shot a slanting glance at them, before saying:

“Come on, you tell them, Kyon!”

Me?

As I was about to drag Koizumi here, I found myself unable to move, undoubtedly shot by Haruhi’s terrifying glare. Seeing that she had already dragged me along, I have no choice, do I?

Beginning with a simple “I’m sorry for interrupting your walk”, I slowly began to explain to them what was happening. I heard that about a week ago, the dogs in this area begin behaving strangely, apparently refusing to come here for a walk. After hearing about this from one of my friends, this struck me as highly unusual, hence I came here to investigate. The same friend I

mentioned earlier came here with her dog, and indeed it behaved as if it didn't want to approach this place. That merely deepened my suspicion, and I decided to come here to investigate once more. Just as I was beginning my investigation, I suddenly saw you having a stroll with your dog, which is seemingly unaffected. That's why I was wondering, could you shed some light on this?

"Oh, so that's what it is,"

Said the guy, who was probably in his twenties. As he spoke, he curiously eyed Asahina-san, who was still clutching the ceremonial staff in her hands.

"It's true that sometime last week, this fellow," he said, pointing at the Shiba Inu, "suddenly hated his original route, which was supposed to be from here to further upstream. No matter what I did, he just wouldn't budge. Even I was stumped at that point."

This athletic guy shifted his gaze to a spot between Haruhi and Asahina-san, and continued:

"However, in my opinion, this place was still the most suitable place to have a walk. A thought suddenly struck me then. Why not try pulling him along by force? About three days ago, I decided to give it a try, as I forcefully pulled him along. Even though I met some resistance initially, after a while, he eventually began to get accustomed to this place again. Now we're able to take a stroll here like we always used to."

While I know nothing about animal psychology, this dog looks perfectly healthy to me, as it sits obediently by its owner's side. It has its eyes opened wide, with a relaxed look on its face.

"I'm guessing that if your friend pulled his or her dog along by force, they'll be able to recover instantly. Even though I'm not sure what happened, I definitely feel that there's something unusual about it. Maybe it's a scent left behind by a hibernating bear or something."

As expected of a university student. Even his deductions were the same as Koizumi's.

"So can I go now?"

"Oh yes, thank you so much for your time and valuable information!"

Haruhi thanked the guy sincerely, as he once again looked at Asahina-san's outfit. For a second there he looked as if he was about to say something, but in the end, all he said was "Well, take care then", before he continued his walk with his dog.

And so the only ones left were Haruhi, who was still holding the Mahayana Sutras in her hand, Asahina-san, who resembled a miko who got lost on her way to the shrine, Nagato, who was still looking at the river, Koizumi, who was busy scratching his chin, and me myself. We look more like the Five Stooges of the SOS Brigade here.

"What's going on here?"

It's just like you just heard.

"What about the spirits? I was really looking forward to spirits materializing!"

I told you from the start there wouldn't be such a thing.

"Then what's going on here?"

No idea.

"…… You seem to be happy about this. I wonder why, because I for one am not happy about this at all!"

Are you trying to pick a fight? I've been serious all this time. I'm not happy that something you wished for didn't come true, and I never once wished against you either.

"Liar."

With that, Haruhi took off with great strides, leaving before my startled eyes.

The SOS Brigade once again gathered, and left for Sakanaka-san's house, leaving the row of cherry-blossom trees far behind us. Not only did we need to report our findings to Sakanaka-san, we also needed to retrieve our bags, which we had left in her house before we departed.

"But……"

Trying to avoid everyone else's gaze, I lowered my voice, and said quietly to Asahina-san.

"What do you think the real reason is? Rousseau seemed to hate this place."

Before Asahina-san could reply, Koizumi abruptly butted in, and said:

"According to what that guy said, his dog had been wary of this place until three days ago. That means that there was something here that would arouse suspicion in his dog then, something that no longer exists now. From what Sakanaka-san said, other dogs, including Rousseau, dared not approach this place, even till now. My best bet is that there is something in their memory that scares them from coming here. If that Shiba Inu's owner hadn't dragged him along by force, I'd say that it would still be afraid of this place. Rousseau, on the other hand, clearly refuses to enter this place. Maybe he's got a better memory than that Shiba Inu."

"……"

Nagato walked silently without saying anything. This made me happier, though. As long as she didn't mention anything, chances were that nothing out of the ordinary had happened. I could rest assured that no bear had recently awoken here three days ago.

It was already dusk, and our surroundings became cooler. All of us tried to match Haruhi's swift footsteps, as we hurried back to Sakanaka-san's house. It was rare to get a client, and having everything end so abruptly without a conclusion was somewhat disappointing. If we were to hand in such a report to our client, I'm afraid that it'll shatter Haruhi's pride as a Brigade Commander. But even so, I know that she'll get over it relatively fast. Even though she had an angry scowl on her face, I'm sure that she'll forget everything in a while. Haruhi wasn't that kind of person that would obsess on lost opportunities. If something didn't turn out well in the past, then so be it. She would immediately focus her attention on another matter.

As we arrived at Sakanaka-san's house, we could finally enter as guests. After being served delicious treats hand-made by Sakanaka-san's mother, Haruhi softened up a little, as she began eating in big bites.

"This is amazing! It's really, really delicious! You could open a restaurant with these! I'm sure they would sell very well!"

In such a luxurious mansion, even the treats appeared exceptionally high-classed and the sofas exceptionally comfortable. If I put Shamisen on one of these sofas, I'm sure that he'll be able to sleep for 12 hours straight. Rich people are really different after all. With such a beautiful mother, and such a high-classed dog, even the atmosphere here seemed different. If Haruhi had been brought up in such a place, she might have even ended up like Sakanaka-san.

As we were busy indulging in our treats, Koizumi reported our findings to Sakanaka-san, who was cradling Rousseau in her arms, and nodding as Koizumi went on. After Koizumi had finished explaining everything though, a peculiar look appeared on her face.

"I understand what you mean, but there's still something that's bothering me."

Sakanaka-san said as she looked at Rousseau's little, fluffy ears.

"Rousseau still seems to dislike that place. Until the day where every other dog will have a walk there without being forced, I won't be bringing Rousseau along that route. It just seems too pitiful."

That's up to you to decide then. What a good owner you have Rousseau, even though I think she's spoiling you too much.

Seeing Haruhi and Nagato eating non-stop, Sakanaka-san's mother continued to prepare more and more treats for us. For some reason, our topic had suddenly shifted to Sakanaka-san's dog, and we laughed as she told us about Rousseau's past antics. Rousseau was slumped by Sakanaka-san's side, as he cocked his ears, as if trying to understand what we were saying. In the

end, however, he seemed to lose interest, as those black eyes of his began drooping. Asahina-san was looking tenderly at Rousseau, her eyes full of affection.

“You’re such a good owner, Sakanaka-san. Your dog must be really happy now.”

Maybe humans weren’t allowed to keep pets in the future? But to tell you the truth, I would choose Asahina-san over a pet any day. Clad in a maid uniform, and greeting me every day, from “Good morning” till “Good night”, wasn’t that better than having a pet? Plus, wasn’t that what a maid was supposed to do, as opposed to brewing tea in club rooms?

Ah who cares. It’s all just a part of my fantasy anyway.

So in the end, all we did today was visit Sakanaka-san’s house, play with her dog, take him out for a walk, let Asahina-san recite some Buddhist Scriptures while clad in a miko outfit, and taste the delicious cooking of Sakanaka-san’s mother before returning home. In other words, it was just like visiting a friend’s house to play.

After that, I thought that what really happened would remain a mystery, as the incident slowly disappeared from my mind and Haruhi’s…

However, a few days later, something unexpected happened.

It was Friday. Everything had ended, including the dreaded end of term exams and intramural sports. Now all that mattered was to wait for the class distribution and spring holidays. The graduation ceremony had already been held back in February, and one third of North High students had already left, making the school seem more peaceful than before. After the holidays, however, the new stressful term would begin, and many things would change.

The first thing that would change would be my status. I wonder if I’ll have anyone to call me senpai? But come to think of it, I doubt anyone would join the SOS Brigade. I wonder what Haruhi thinks of this?

After the second period, I found myself looking out of the second window from the back, as I enjoyed the warm, spring sunlight. I was beginning to stretch my arms when:

“Kyon.”

The person sitting behind me said as she jabbed me with her mechanical pencil.

“What is it?”

If you want me to persuade new members to join the SOS Brigade, you can forget it.

“That’s not it. There’s something else I have to tell you.”

Haruhi said as she pointed her mechanical pencil towards the front of the class.

“Sakanaka-san didn’t turn up for class today. Didn’t you notice?”

“I didn’t… Is that so?”

“Yeah. She’s been absent since this morning.”

That was really shocking, hearing Haruhi talking about our other classmates! The only others she had ever talked about were the idiot Taniguchi and Asakura Ryouko.

“She’s one of our clients, remember? I had originally wanted to ask her if she had resumed her original route, and how Rousseau was doing. Didn’t you notice she wasn’t here at all? Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten all about her and her adorable dog, and those delicious treats too!”

Normally, I would have been glad that Haruhi had finally shown some concern for a female classmate, but if she hadn’t told me about this, I wouldn’t have noticed at all. Sakanaka-san had indeed asked for our help to investigate a certain ‘forbidden area’ where dogs dared not approach near her home, but what’s that got to do with her being absent? Sure, we did leave the whole case unsettled, but I don’t see any connection between that and being absent. After all, being absent once in a while is hardly out of the ordinary.

“Maybe it’s because of the change in seasons that she caught a flu or something? Besides, it’s almost the end of the school term now. Skipping a few days of class is hardly surprising.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

Faced with my solid deductions, Haruhi can only agree.

“The same goes with me. If it weren’t for the SOS Brigade, I would have skipped school entirely. But, that doesn’t strike me as something Sakanaka-san would do. She’s not the type to suddenly turn the calendars red – or at least that’s what I think.”

For someone who uses our holidays for SOS Brigade activities, I don’t think you follow the calendar too strictly either.

“Hmm…”

Haruhi said as she bit her pencil.

“Let’s go check that place out one more time, shall we? We’ll have Mikuru-chan dress as a nurse this time.”

What’s the point of having someone dress up as a nurse when they don’t even have basic first aid skills? Why don’t you just admit that you want more high-class treats?

“That’s not it, you fool. I want to see JJ. Haven’t you ever wondered if his fur will grow back after being completely shaved, like a sheep?”

Haruhi began twirling her pencil in her hands in a bored fashion, as the bell for the third period rang.

School progressed as usual, with nothing eventful happening. Soon school was over.

Koizumi and I were once again playing chess in the clubroom, while Asahina-san, dressed in the maid uniform that was much more suitable for her compared to the miko costume, was busy brewing tea.

Just then Haruhi, who was supposed to be late due to class duty, barged in the room and shouted:

“Kyon, it’s exactly as I thought!”

Even though Haruhi said so with a smile on her face, I could detect an aura of anxiety radiating from her. I had a bad feeling about this.

“I finally know why Sakanaka-san is absent from school. She says that she’s not really well today.”

“But the truth is, the one who’s not really well is JJ. She even brought him to a vet, but even they couldn’t diagnose what was wrong with him. Sakanaka-san was really worried about him, and therefore decided to skip school. When I talked to her over the phone about it, it seemed that she was on the verge of tears. She hasn’t eaten anything since this morning, since JJ didn’t, and that made her feel even worse—-”

“Calm down.”

That was all I could say, faced with Haruhi who was talking non-stop, but my comment seemed to further anger her. She glared at me as if I were someone who refused to save a dying person, and said:

“What’s wrong with you? JJ’s sick, and yet you can still sit down here peacefully and continue drinking tea? JJ hasn’t drunk a sip of water so far today, and that has further weakened him!”

If drinking tea is an offence, then Koizumi and Asahina-san should be equally found guilty. Furthermore, how was I supposed to know you would come barging in here, and that so many things had happened in the Sakanaka residence?

“As I was doing class duty, I suddenly had the urge to phone Sakanaka-san, and when I did—-”

I am shocked. That's the second time Haruhi has said something that surprised me. I wonder when had they exchanged cell phone numbers?

"Now's not the time to be doing class duty."

Haruhi said as she withdrew her cell phone from her pocket.

"There really is something there! I bet that it's this thing that caused JJ to fall sick! Didn't Sakanaka-san say that before? Other dogs in the neighborhood have also mysteriously fallen ill."

Now that you mention it, there was something I wanted to confirm.

"If it's the same disease they're having, then —-"

"It's the same sickness all right."

Haruhi interrupted shakily.

"I just heard from Sakanaka-san that when she brought JJ to the vet, he said that he had treated dogs with the same disease a few days ago. Curious, she pressed on, only to find out that the dogs in question were Higuchi-san's."

Who's Higuchi-san again?

"Oh, you're such an idiot, Kyon! Didn't Sakanaka-san tell us about her the day she came to visit our clubroom? Higuchi-san's the one who has many dogs. She lives near Sakanaka-san, and one day one of her dogs fell ill. Weren't you paying any attention then?"

Well, pardon me for not being attentive enough! I bet that you forgot all about her until you just made that phone call minutes ago! Why are you blaming me then? And, even though Rousseau is sick now, why do you seem so excited about it?

"What sickness is it?"

"Didn't I say earlier? It's an unknown sickness."

It seemed that Haruhi had forgotten all about the Commander's chair, as she continued to talk while standing upright.

"Even the vets are baffled. Physically, he's perfectly fine, but it seems that he's too unmotivated to do anything. The same goes with Higuchi-san's Michael! They won't even budge to eat!"

Haruhi shot her glance straight at me, as if suggesting, "it's all because of you that they're sick now, you moron!" I avoided her glare, and checked what the other Brigade members' reactions were.

Asahina-san had apparently freaked out after learning that Rousseau was sick, because she was tightly hugging the tea tray in her hands. Nagato had lifted her gaze from her book, and was quietly listening to what Haruhi had to say. Koizumi had already put the chessboard back in its box.

“We need to investigate again.”

Koizumi said while revealing a smile that resembled a vet trying to persuade a sick pet’s worried owner not to worry.

“This is, after all, something that Sakanaka-san asked us to help her with. Now that things have taken such a turn, I don’t think we can just ignore it.”

“T-that’s right! Why don’t we go visit Rousseau?”

Upon hearing Koizumi’s suggestion, Asahina-san furiously nodded her head.

Nagato merely closed her book and stood upright.

Every Brigade member was worried about Rousseau’s well-being. Even though we had only been together with him for a day, each member seemed to be fondly attached to him. I’m afraid that this is one of the qualities that only dogs possess.

“What about you?”

Haruhi said as she glared at me, as if picking a fight.

“What about me?”

Even if it was lazy old me, upon hearing that cute, doll-like dog fall sick, I couldn’t just sit down and do nothing. Unlike Shamisen, this was a dog born with a silver bowl in its mouth, a high-class, pure-bred Scottish Highland White Terrier. His health shouldn’t be that bad.

I ignored Haruhi and looked at the other members.

“……”

The girl who had assured me there was nothing wrong with that place had an unusually weird expression on her face. It was as if Nagato Yuki was in deep thought.

After Asahina-san had finished changing, the five of us ran out of school, as if competing in a race to the station. After reaching the station, we found the train about to depart, and after running at full speed, barely managed to get on it. Once Haruhi put her mind to something, her battle capabilities easily exceeded that of a Mongolian cavalry captain.

It didn't take us long to arrive at the high-classed neighborhood, as Haruhi anxiously pressed Sakanaka-san's doorbell.

"I'm coming…"

Sakanaka-san came to get the door. From what I could tell, it seemed that she had thinned down a lot, as her face was full of worry, and her eyes red from crying.

"Please come in, Suzumiya-san. Thanks for everything…"

The five of us entered at Sakanaka-san's invitation, and proceeded towards the hall. We immediately saw Rousseau sleeping lazily on the elegant sofas. Maybe it was due to his bad mood, but the glistening luster that used to be present on his snow white fur was gone. As he slid down the sofa, he passed us without bothering to lift his head for a glance, nor did he bother to wag his tail or move his ears.

"Rousseau-chan…"

Asahina-san was the first one to approach Rousseau. She knelt down and patted Rousseau's small nose, which in turn caused him to look back at her with his little black, sad eyes. After that, he laid down on the floor, as if too lazy to do anything else. Even when Asahina-san placed her hand on his little head, Rousseau merely responded by flicking his ears. There was something very wrong with him, all right.

"When did he start behaving like this?"

Haruhi asked. Sakanaka-san wearily replied:

"Around yesterday evening. At first, I thought that he was just tired and wanted to take a nap, but when I woke up this morning, I found him slouched on the same spot, not moving at all. He even ignored his dinner. That's why I didn't bring him for a walk this morning, and instead took him to the vet…"

Everything had happened just like Haruhi had said in the club room. Right now, we could confirm two things: One - the reason of the disease was unknown, and two – it was the same disease some other dog had earlier.

"Yes… Higuchi-san's Michael is good friends with Rousseau…"

Asahina-san slowly patted Rousseau's head, as if comforting a patient using her tenderness. Her sadness seemed infectious, as even I was beginning to feel sorry for Rousseau. In order to stop it from spreading, I secretly punched myself in the chest.

"Oh yes, there's something I would like to ask."

Said the shameless Koizumi.

“If I’m not mistaken, Higuchi-san’s Michael should have been infected by this disease five days ago, right? If so, how is his condition now?”

“I gave Higuchi-san a call this afternoon. According to her, Michael’s still as weak-spirited as before. Because he refuses to eat anything, Higuchi-san is forced to bring him to the vet for nutrition shots. If the same thing happens to Rousseau, what am I going to do?”

If things go on like this, he’ll become weaker and weaker. Thinking back about the energetic Rousseau I had met just days ago, compared to this lifeless dog lying on the ground, I suddenly realized how big the difference was. I also thought about Shamisen lying down on my bed lazily, without moving at all, but I guess they’re totally different circumstances, huh. This is worrying, all right.

“There’s another thing I would like to ask.” Koizumi continued. “Are Michael and Rousseau the only dogs who are infected with this particular illness? You seem to know many friends who have dogs in this neighborhood.”

“I haven’t asked anyone else, but it was only when Michael fell ill that the rumors spread. If other dogs had fallen ill too, I’m sure that I would have heard about it somehow.”

“Then where does Michael’s owner, Higuchi-san, live?”

“Erm, just opposite my house, three houses away… Why?”

“Nah, it’s nothing.”

Koizumi said as he finished his questioning session.

Sakanaka-san lowered her head and said:

“Spirits are really behind everything, eh? Even the vet didn’t seem to know what was going on…”

Haruhi replied with her face full of anxiety:

“There’s always a possibility… But it’s definitely strange. Plus, we can’t be sure if spirits are really the cause. Now’s not the time to be playing around though.”

From the look on Haruhi’s face, it seems that she may regret wishing for how spirits would come flying, and how she made Asahina-san dress up as a miko and start chanting some weird Buddhist Scriptures. Now you know that it’s impossible to exorcise spirits by merely dressing as a miko, eh? Haruhi is really troubled, all right.

“Yuki, did you notice anything odd?”

Even though it's rare for Haruhi to ask Nagato anything, upon hearing her request, she politely put down her bag, walked towards Rousseau and knelt down beside a worried Asahina-san, before staring at Rousseau straight in the face.

I stood beside her and watched, not daring to even take a breath.

"……"

Nagato placed her finger beneath Rousseau's chin, lifted his head, and looked straight into Rousseau's small, black eyes. She had a very serious look in her eyes, like a sensor trying to read data off a DVD. She brought her head closer to Rousseau, until they practically touched each other, and stared like that for 30 seconds.

"……"

Nagato slowly stood up like a drifting spirit and redirected her gaze at the original spot she was standing before. Very slowly, she shook her head.

Haruhi sighed loudly.

"Even Yuki can't tell anything, huh. Sigh…"

I don't know what she expected from Nagato, but it seems that the current situation is out of Nagato's simple healing powers. Even aliens had no cure, eh? Just as I was about to despair, I suddenly felt a strong gaze penetrate my back.

I turned to look back, only to see Nagato staring straight at me. Her eyes could probably see things smaller than a microscope; she suddenly nodded, then drifted away again.

Haruhi, Asahina-san and Sakanaka-san must have missed Nagato's actions, seeing that they were too occupied with Rousseau. But there was one person I knew who would always be watching Nagato-san's every move.

"I think it's time to head back."

Koizumi whispered into my ear.

"There's nothing we can do even if we remain here. That includes you and me."

Koizumi gave me a soft laugh before continuing. Don't keep on whispering in my ear. It's gross.

"Even though Suzumiya-san has yet to explode in fury, from the looks of it, she can't calm down either. You know what Suzumiya-san does when she's enraged. If she does go on a rampage, I'm afraid that even I'll be terrified. We need to end this soon, and the only one who can do that would be —-"

Koizumi elegantly turned his head towards Nagato, then turned back to wink at me. Ugh. That's disgusting.

'What do you mean?' was what I was about to say, but I had a feeling that Koizumi knew that I understood what he meant perfectly. Maybe it's because I'm a smart person overall. Why is it that I can be so smart when it comes to reading Nagato's facial expressions or Koizumi's hidden clues, but fail to answer every single test question? Sigh. All right then, but please note that I'm not doing this for your sake, Koizumi. I just don't want to have Rousseau and Sakanaka-san dragged into all of this.

I may get beaten up for that.

After leaving Sakanaka-san's house, it seemed like Haruhi and Asahina-san had each left part of their soul there with Rousseau, as they continued lifelessly towards the station. They were silent all the way to the station, in the station, and even after leaving the station, just like breathing corpses. It seems that Sakanaka-san's depression has infected them as well.

I understand these feelings of depression well. Seeing something so lively and energetic become so frail and sickly is a painful process. But instead of being cooped up in depression, we would be better off taking a stroll to soothe our minds. Besides, there's nothing we outsiders can do. After all, we aren't dog experts —- That was Koizumi's icy conclusion.

"The only thing we can do is standby and watch. But don't worry. The vets aren't idiots. They must be formulating a plan now, right?"

If only they could find out what the cause of the disease was via research. But what if they couldn't? I don't want to attend Rousseau's funeral, for certain.

"It's a good thing I know a few vets. I'll try giving them a call. Maybe they've got leads on this."

Even though Koizumi was trying his best to cheer the girls up, it didn't seem to be working on Haruhi and Asahina-san at all. They remained silent aside from the occasional 'Oh's and 'Hmm's.

Since it was pointless continuing on in this somber mood, the five of us decided to call it a day. If we hadn't done so, we would all probably still be stuck in front of the station, staring blankly into space.

As Haruhi and Asahina-san shuffled forward, Koizumi and I stayed behind. We usually take the same path as Haruhi, seeing that it was closer to our homes, but Haruhi didn't seem to notice this. After a while, the two of them gradually disappeared from our sight.

How I wish Asahina-san had stayed behind! It's a pity then. It seems that she won't be able to step up on the stage this time.

After witnessing the two girls head home, Nagato turned and started towards her own apartment. However, all she did was face the direction of her apartment. She herself remained rooted on the spot.

“Nagato.”

As the short haired, sailor-suit clad girl turned back to face me, I wondered if she had predicted I would call her name?

Upon looking at the expression on her face, I was sure that she knew something. Without wasting any time, I asked her:

“What’s up with Rousseau?”

Nagato hesitated a while, before answering:

“Data lifeforms.”

After listening to her ‘explanation’, the only thing I could do was remain silent.

“……”

Is she aware that I’m not sure what she’s saying? Sensing my confusion, Nagato added:

“Paragenetic silicon-based data lifeforms.”

“……”

As if sensing that I was still lost, Nagato opened her mouth to say something. However, she abruptly shut it, and fell silent once again, as if not wanting to add anymore.

“……”

And so the both of us looked at each other in silence.

“In other words, Rousseau is infected by some other-worldly being, am I right?”

Koizumi suddenly interjected, as if attempting to create a shortcut of his own. Nagato paused for a moment, as if seeking confirmation from someone, before replying:

“Yes.”

Nagato then nodded her head.

“So that’s how it is. These ‘data lifeforms’ are actually things that humans aren’t capable of seeing. Or to be more precise, things that human beings can’t possibly see, since they don’t have an actual physical form. They merely ‘exist’, am I right?”

“Does that mean that they are beings similar to the Integrated Data Sentient Entity? Much like the kind that infected the Computer Society President’s computer and spread via the Internet?”

“Compared to the Integrated Data Sentient Entity, they are of different status. They are classified as a more primitive being.”

“So are there any similarities between them? If the Integrated Data Sentient Entity decided to latch on to a human being, just like the ‘Paragenetic Silicon-based Data Lifeforms’ decided to infect Rousseau, would there be a similar result?”

He’s really something special, that Koizumi. How he managed to remember that long, complicated name after hearing it just once I have no idea. Faced with Koizumi’s incoming barrage of questions, Nagato calmly replied:

“Viral.”

“What do you mean by ‘viral’? The dog’s body, no, the dog’s mind, was the first to display any irregularities… Does that mean that these symptoms are caused by the ‘data lifeforms’ breeding rapidly in Rousseau’s body, just like viruses do?”

Koizumi asked this as he flicked his hair with his finger.

“And one more thing – What are these ‘data lifeforms’ doing on earth? Why are they infecting dogs?”

“Perhaps,”

Nagato replied simply.

“Because of the silicon that is present in their data composition, they are attracted to the Earth’s gravity, just like how meteors are. The silicon compositions were destroyed due to friction with the Earth’s atmosphere, leaving behind only the data composition. Even if their physical silicon bodies were destroyed, their data compositions weren’t. This is why they can continue to remain on the Earth.”

“They happened to be scattered around the area where the dogs frequently had walks. As the unsuspecting dogs passed by, they took the opportunity to latch onto them.”

“Maybe it’s because these ‘Silicon Lifeforms’ have nervous structures similar to those of dogs.”

“But since they are an external lifeform after all, they have caused the dogs to weaken after infecting them.”

During this endless Q & A session with Koizumi, Nagato opened and shut her mouth rapidly. After Koizumi’s questions had apparently ended, she opened her mouth again and said:

“These ‘data lifeforms’ are planning to expand their memory circuit.”

What does that mean—-

Even though I was lost in the dark, Koizumi seemed to have understood perfectly.

“One dog wasn’t enough to perform such a feat, and I don’t think two are sufficient either. In order to expand their brains to the sizes of the ‘Silicon data lifeforms’ memory capabilities, how many dogs would that take?”

“According to the minimum estimations of the ‘Silicon data lifeforms’ memory capabilities, it would require at least every single dog on the planet to perform a large scale data transmission…”

“Wait a second.”

I had a very bad feeling about this.

“Rousseau and some other dog are infected by some cosmic virus, this I understand. These viruses originated from outer-space and are like meteors, this I understand too. But the one thing I want to know is, in the wide universe, aside from humans like us, and these ‘data lifeforms’ which are made up of an accumulation of data as you said, Nagato… What else is out there?”

Nagato fell silent, as if in deep thought, before she blinked once and said:

“The answer to this question would be incomprehensible to organic lifeforms like you.”

She stared at me with her clear eyes, as if trying to draw me into her pupils.

“But as these ‘Silicon-based data lifeforms’ have thought processors within their composition, it is very likely that other similar lifeforms exist.”

That’s easy for you to say. I know that I’ll never sleep well after learning the answer to this question.

Since I’ve already come this far, I might just as well ask her more.

“What is this ‘silicon’ you keep mentioning?”

Sorry about that. I don't get along well with my chemistry teacher, and my chemistry grades have never been good either.

"Simply put, it is the silicon element, Si,"

Koizumi answered.

"It's a very famous semi-conductor."

Koizumi then threw Nagato another deep smile.

"I think what Nagato-san mentioned earlier is what we call a 'Mechanically Subconscious being'. It's another form of Artificial Intelligence we humans have yet to discover. Somewhere in the huge universe is a type of 'Mechanical Sub-consciousness' that is not artificially manufactured. In other words, it is a non-living thing that has the ability to process thoughts on its own. Or maybe I should say that throughout the entire universe, these beings are fairly common. It's just us humans that are different."

Nagato, on the other hand, was totally ignoring what Koizumi had to say as she continued to stare at me. It was as if she were trying to tell me the key to everything.

I suddenly recalled the first time Nagato lent me a book. There had been a single bookmark in it, and from the instructions written on the bookmark, I had gone out to meet Nagato for the first time. It was then that she told me—-

—- It is impossible for organic lifeforms, who have limited data collection and transmission ability, to be able to acquire knowledge.

Koizumi scratched his chin instinctively.

"Maybe these 'Silicon compositions' are no more than ordinary materials. Only after the 'Data lifeforms' latched onto them did they gain knowledge."

Nagato looked up at the sky, made a gesture that suggested she was acquiring permission, before assuming her original pose and saying:

"Knowledge…"

She made a brief pause, before continuing:

"Is based on how much data one has collected and accumulated based on one's current data handling abilities."

Nagato hasn't spoken for so long in quite a while. The last time I remember her ever talking for so long was when she revealed to me her identity as a humanoid interface for the Integrated Data

Sentient Entity. It seems that if a topic catches her attention, she'll go on talking on and on about it.

"The 'Data composition' resides in the 'Silicon composition'. Through mutual interaction, they are able to assist one another in thought processes. These 'Data lifeforms' are nothing more than isolated data clusters. In order to obtain new data, they attach themselves to any suitable material present. Both parties form a mutual interaction for their individual benefit."

But what about these so-called 'Silicon lifeforms'? Lifeforms that can survive even after immolation within the Earth's atmosphere?

"They are lifeforms that have reached an evolutionary dead end,"

Nagato said simply.

"They are capable of nothing else save thought processes. The universe is very, very wide. These lifeforms constantly drift around the universe, because they are capable of processing nothing more than thoughts of self preservation.

Then what are they doing, drifting all around the universe?

"Their thought pattern is not something that organic lifeforms like you can relate to, because of the inconsistencies between basic thought patterns."

So it seems that we can't interact with them. Then I guess there's no point of calling in NASA to investigate. Even though contact was made, it would serve no point.

"Sheesh."

How in the world did Sakanaka-san's 'spirits' turn into cosmic beings? Isn't this exaggerating too much? And forget knowledge or thought patterns. I couldn't even understand one of Nagato's science fiction novels.

So it's hard to put this to an end, eh. It wasn't something modern science could explain, philosophers could understand, or religion could solve. Unseen 'Data lifeforms' composed mainly of 'Silicon'… A simple way to put it would be 'spirits', eh?

"Probably."

A weird thought suddenly struck me. The first time Sakanaka-san approached us, she had told us some rumors about spirits.

"Do spirits really exist?"

'Data lifeforms' without any physical being that came from outer space. Even though their 'physical silicon compositions' were destroyed, they continued to live on by depending on their

‘data compositions’. After landing on Earth, they would latch on, or possess, any suitable host they found. Would these qualify as spirits?

“What about humans? We have our own thought processes and consciousness too. Do you mean to tell me that even after I die one day, my soul will continue to live on?”

Oh whatever —- No wait, on second thought, I couldn’t take things so lightly this time. This was something important, after all. To know whether I continued to exist after my death was an important thing I needed to know. I dare say that Nagato’s answer here will influence my entire life.

Nagato didn’t reply. She had a very weird expression on her face. I couldn’t tell what it was, but I knew that something was off. Even if no one were to notice it, I would always be able to read Nagato’s emotions. After all, I’ve been together with her for almost an entire year now. All the time spent observing her this past year has been sufficient to read her emotions, I dare say. Plus, there were many incidents last year that practically forced me to read her emotions. So, I don’t think that I’m wrong on this one.

Nagato —-

“……”

Was still not willing to say anything. And her expression was definitely weird. It was as if she was trying to tell me something —-

“……”

Nagato looked at me, as if I had just cracked a lame joke. Can’t you at least smile?

Nagato’s response finally came. Needless to say, it was very short and simple.

“That’s classified information.”

I heard a very loud sigh, before realizing that I was the one who had emitted it. Classified information, eh. Now where have I heard that before? The next time someone asks me a question I don’t understand, I’m going to reply ‘Classified Information’. I think I’ll try it out the next time a teacher asks me something in class.

Has Nagato ever cracked a joke before, ever since the day she was born? This was another question I had in mind, but let’s ignore it for the time being. Now we should be focusing on Rousseau, and how do we rid him of that pesky cosmic virus.

“Just think of a way to get rid of that virus, okay, Nagato?”

“Alright.”

Nagato seemed very reliable whenever she said that.

“First we have to force the ‘data compositions’ into submission, before attempting to compress them into the smallest size possible. We will then need to render their activities to zero, and this can only be done using a working network interface.”

Even though I had no idea what she was talking about, I could tell that it was very troublesome. Can’t we just exterminate them altogether?

“We cannot exterminate them.”

“Why?”

“Because it is not allowed.”

Your bosses aren’t allowing you to exterminate them?

“Yes.”

Don’t these ‘Data lifeforms’ pose a threat towards the universe?

“They are actually beneficial towards the universe.”

They seem more like lactobacilli or Escherichia coli to us humans though.

I think it’s time to pass this annoying soccer ball to Koizumi. Seeing him standing there with a bemused look on his face made me angry, for some reason.

“Why don’t we just stuff these Silicon beings into a container, and shoot them back into outer space with a rocket? Your ‘Organization’ should be able to handle such a simple feat, no?”

Koizumi gently shrugged his shoulders, before saying:

“First of all, we would need a silicon casting container to place them in. After that, if we organize some big scale economical or political activities, we should be able to amass enough funds to purchase a Hydrogen Rocket. The only problem lies in capturing these Silicon lifeforms.”

So you can’t do it after all. No… Wait a second…

Something suddenly flashed in my mind. Not long ago, Tsuruya-san had dug up something strange from the mountain behind her house, and it was probably dated back the Genroku period. Can’t we use that now? That mysterious object from the past?

According to Tsuruya-san, that rod was made out of titanium-cesium alloy. If her ancestor had unveiled such a device during the Genroku period, even Yamataikoku would become a peaceful place to live. Since he had no idea how to use it, or how to dispose of it, the only things he thought of were to seal it up and preserve it for the future. I really don't want to stumble upon one of those things again. Let's just hope that this is pure coincidence.

As I was lost deep in my thoughts, Koizumi's voice drifted by my ears, forcefully pulling me back to reality.

"It's a good thing the current situation isn't too urgent. We only know of two dogs that have this current sickness, the first being the one mentioned by Sakanaka-san, and the second being Rousseau. There is a margin of five days before Rousseau was affected, so if we think of something these few days, we should be able to prevent more similar cases from happening."

But time on Earth is different from time in the Universe, right? Should we be happy that these viruses had decided to adopt Earth's time?

"We'll go visit Sakanaka-san again tomorrow. Even though it's a weekend, I think we'd better think of an excuse before visiting her. It would seem very suspicious if we were to visit her two times in a row. Oh and we'll have to think of an excuse to see Higuchi-san too…"

That was as far as I listened to. You should be the one to take care of such excuses, since we've already troubled Nagato with the task of finding a cure.

"So we'll meet tomorrow. I'm sorry to trouble you, but we're counting on you, Nagato."

Just like how Haruhi and Asahina-san seemed to have left their souls in Sakanaka-san's house, I too seemed to have lost my spirit. My head was spinning with thoughts of other-worldly beings and cosmic lifeforms. As I was ready to leave for my house, I suddenly felt as if someone was pulling me strongly from behind. What was it now?

I turned around, only to find Nagato pointing at my belt, not saying anything. If you want to get my attention, Nagato, couldn't you have at least said something? Or tug my sleeve or something. However, seeing that I had asked her for a favor, I decided to remain silent about this matter.

Nagato moved her lips, without a change in facial expression.

"Preparations need to be made."

"What do you need?"

"A cat."

Just as I was about to utter out an astonished 'Huh', Nagato quickly opened her mouth, as if she had expected it, and said:

“I would like to use your cat.”

After Koizumi, Nagato and I had finished planning our battle strategies, we each headed back to our respective houses. As I was on my way home, I took out my cell phone and gave Haruhi a call.

“Hello, Haruhi? It’s me. Now about Rousseau, after you had went home just now, Nagato said that she had read about Rousseau’s condition somewhere in a book before… Yes, there was even a cure for it. They even guarantee that he’ll recover… Oh, yes I understand. Should we give it a try? Nagato says she knows what to do, so I’m hoping that we can go to Sakanaka-san’s house again tomorrow… What, now? That’s too demanding, don’t you think? We haven’t even done the necessary preparations yet. We’ll head there after gathering tomorrow. Don’t worry, Nagato says that his condition won’t worsen… Yea, so I’m asking you to inform Sakanaka-san about it. Oh and by the way, there’s another dog with the similar illness right? Higuchi-san’s Michael… Tell Sakanaka-san to bring him along to her house tomorrow. I’ll inform Asahina-san about this. So, we’ll meet at 9 tomorrow, at our regular spot before the station.”

When I arrived at the station the next day, all the members of the SOS Brigade had already gathered. Even though I had arrived 20 minutes before the scheduled time.

However, the only ones who looked normal were Nagato and Koizumi. Asahina-san had a very worried look on her face, while Haruhi looked like someone who had invested all her money into purchasing the day’s lottery, and was eagerly looking forward for the winning number to be revealed.

“You’re late!”

Haruhi said while giving me a very weird glance.

This was one of those rare days where I wasn’t required to treat all Brigade members for a drink. Haruhi grabbed my wrist, and pulled me towards the train station.

“I heard everything from Koizumi-kun before you came,” Haruhi said as she bought tickets for everyone. “But is it true that Yuki knows an obscure folk remedy for that illness, Hinekobyou?”

Hinekobyou? What’s that? Some kind of new species found in Polynesia?

“It’s the disease that Yuki suspects is infecting Rousseau.”

After receiving my ticket from Haruhi, I hurried over to the automated gates. Trying to cover up for my previous slip, Koizumi said:

“If an active dog suddenly loses all its motivation and lies down lazily like a cat in the sun, they’re suspected to have this particular disease. It’s a very rare disease that isn’t even recorded in medical books. Some experts say that it isn’t a disease but merely over-tiredness.”

Koizumi shot me a glance, as he continued:

“—- That’s what I heard from Nagato-san, who seems to have read about it in an old book.”

Abruptly, as if agreeing to everything that had been said, Nagato slowly nodded her head. So they discussed this earlier on, eh.

Nagato looked at the plastic bag in Koizumi’s hands, which bore the infamous supermarket logo, before shifting her gaze to the cardboard box in my hand.

“Meow~”

Shamisen purred as he began scratching the walls of the cardboard box with his claws, as if trying to say ‘hi’ to Nagato.

Haruhi gazed strangely at the box in my hands.

“To think that you’d require a cat to cure a disease, what a strange sickness indeed. Are you sure this’ll work, Yuki? Can we trust that book?”

From the way things seemed, exorcising Rousseau may be a better word to substitute for ‘cure’. But of course, I couldn’t say that to Haruhi. For once I appreciated Nagato’s silence.

Without uttering a word, Nagato nodded her head lightly, as she stretched her hand towards me. That’s too bad, Nagato. Even if you offer me your hand, there’s nothing I can give you. Even my hands are full carrying this Shamisen in this lousy box.

“Cat.”

Nagato said in an emotionless monotone.

“Lend him to me.”

After entering the train, I placed the cardboard box on Nagato’s lap, thus freeing my hands of their burden. Maybe it’s because we’re in the train, but Nagato sat eerily still without saying anything at all, as if she were trying to tell me something. Shamisen too quieted down, as he laid down still in his box.

As if trying to sandwich Nagato in-between, Haruhi and Asahina-san each sat beside Nagato. It was then that they finally noticed the box, and that Shamisen was lying inside. However, compared to him, I think the plastic bag in Koizumi's hands is more suspicious.

"Don't worry. All necessary preparations are complete."

Haruhi shouldn't be able to listen to two men chatting by the train door. Koizumi shook the plastic bag, and said:

"Since I only had one night to prepare this, I must say that it's not really good, but it's the best I can do. The rest is up to Nagato-san."

I had faith in Nagato's abilities. I believed that she could cure Rousseau, all right. What I'm worried about, however, is what she's going to do with those cosmic viruses.

"That's where I come into play. Even though I'm saying this based purely on intuition, things shouldn't turn out to be too complicated. Just look at Suzumiya-san. The most important thing for her now is to have Rousseau cured. Once this is done, my mission will be accomplished."

Let's hope that things go so smoothly.

I avoided Koizumi's glance, and tightened my grip on the handrails, as the train picked up speed. There were only two stations left to Sakanaka-san's neighborhood. There wasn't much time left to think.

The Sakanaka-san that came out to welcome us today was completely similar to the one who had greeted us yesterday, but maybe it's because there was a sliver of hope that I detected a faint aura of determination in her eyes.

"Suzumiya-san…"

Sakanaka-san sounded as if she was about to cry. Haruhi's expression turned serious, as she nodded her head, before turning back to face the most outstanding member of the SOS Brigade, who was dressed in a school uniform that seemed to be specially made for her.

"Just leave it to us, Sakanaka-san. Even though she may not look like it, Yuki's actually a very knowledgeable and capable girl. I'm sure JJ will be fine in a moment."

We entered the living room once again, only to find Sakanaka-san's mother and another woman waiting for us there. Based on her looks alone, I'd say she's a university student. She's probably Higuchi-san, whose dog was also infected by the same disease – this I guessed based on the worried expression on her face. The little terrier in her hands should be Michael.

Rousseau was still as unhealthy as he was yesterday, as he lay still on the sofa, not moving at all. Even though his eyes were open, he seemed to be spacing out, as if staring straight into something no one else could see. The same went for Michael.

I think it's about time we began. I looked at Nagato and Koizumi.

The three of us had decided yesterday that we would leave Nagato in charge. I would serve as her assistant, while Koizumi was to prepare all the needed equipment. Even though I have no idea where he got it, I was relieved that I could rely on him at times like this, because I had no idea where we were supposed to get a silicon container from.

The first thing I did was draw the curtains shut, blocking all forms of sunlight from entering the room. I then proceeded to turn off the lights, so that in the end the room was almost pitch dark. I retrieved a big, thick candle from Koizumi's plastic bag, before placing it on a big altar. I lit the candle, then lit some joss sticks, also placing them on the altar. As I did so, the living room was filled with all sorts of weird smoke and aromas. After that, I gave Nagato a signal.

Nagato took Shamisen from the box, and cradled him in her arms. Truth to be told, Shamisen detested being carried this way, and he would normally scratch and claw his way out of it. However, seeing him remain totally still and silent made me realize that even he couldn't hope to stand against the prowess of the alien Nagato.

"Excuse me… Is it alright if you place that dog beside Rousseau?"

I asked to the young, tastefully dressed Higuchi-san who, upon seeing us set up everything as if it were a ritual, had begun eyeing us suspiciously. But in the end, she followed what I said, and soon there were two lifeless dogs lying on the sofa, looking as if their spirits had been extracted out of their bodies forcefully.

Carrying Shamisen in her arms, Nagato headed towards the sofa, before kneeling down.

Seeing that all preparations were now complete, I pressed the 'Play' button on an electronic tape recorder. Pretty soon, a piece of weird, eerie music filled the air. To tell you the truth, I was beginning to wonder if we had gone too far; but as Koizumi said, if we're going to do something, we might as well go all the way.

In the midst of flickering candlelight, mysterious aromas and weird music, Nagato began her strange ritual.

"……"

Even in this dark room, Nagato still appeared as pale and emotionless as ever. She slowly placed her left hand on Rousseau's head and stroked it a few times, then put her right hand on Shamisen's forehead. Even though he was in a totally unfamiliar room with two dogs, Shamisen still lay down quietly without making a sound.

Nagato even placed Shamisen before Rousseau's nose, until both their nose tips touched. Very slowly, Rousseau's black, beady eyes began to move, as Shamisen's wide opened eyes began to slowly close. As if trying to transfer something from Rousseau into Shamisen, Nagato frequently stroked their heads alternatively with her hands. The same thing was happening to Michael, as Nagato's lips moved silently, as if she was chanting something. We couldn't hear what was she chanting, but it did make me wonder if she did this on purpose. I think the only ones to realize this were Koizumi and I.

Finally, Nagato pressed Shamisen's forehead firmly upon both dog's nostrils, before standing up, and, without uttering a word, placed Shamisen back in his original cardboard box. She then picked up the box, returned it to me, and finally said:

"It's over."

Of course, everyone present could only stare at her without saying anything. Even I, with the cardboard box in my hand, didn't know what to say, never mind Haruhi, Asahina-san or Sakanaka-san.

Haruhi stood there with her mouth opened wide, as if wanting to say something, but didn't know what to say. After a while, she finally managed to choke out:

"It's over? Right now? Yuki? What did you do just now?"

Nagato turned her head, and looked at both dogs, as if telling us 'These are the ones you should be looking at'. Taking a hint, I turned towards the sofa.

And on the sofa—-

Even though the two dogs appeared pretty confused to me, I could tell from their eyes that they had already regained their energy. The looks on their cute faces suggested that they were looking for their owners…

"Rousseau!"

"Michael!"

Sakanaka-san and Higuchi-san immediately ran forward and hugged their beloved dogs tightly. The two dogs let out a simultaneous "woof~" and began licking at their owner's faces. They wagged their tails rapidly, as if in response to their owners' sudden actions. Even Asahina-san wept tears of joy.

After a few minutes, this living room finally reverted to its original lively state, as if a dark, depressing curse had finally been lifted.

As Rousseau and Michael were in the kitchen busy indulging in the cooking of Sakanaka-san's mother, we of the SOS Brigade sat on the sofa, together with Sakanaka-san and Higuchi-san.

“What you just witnessed was Nagato performing an old folk remedy by using cats as a form of treatment.”

Even though I could tell that Koizumi’s story was a lousy one, it seemed that his charming smile and fluent speech had everyone else fooled.

“The candles and joss sticks contain special spices that dogs are especially sensitive to, thanks to their superior sense of smell. The weird music we played earlier apparently helps them relax.”

Even though I felt that crap should only be spouted to a certain degree, for this once, I let Koizumi spout as much crap as he wanted to. All that mattered was that Rousseau and Michael were back to normal, and everyone was happy. Higuchi-san should be happier than the whole lot of us, seeing that her dog was now fine, and Sakanaka-san’s mother should have been even happier, now that both her beloved dog and her daughter were back to normal. In order to show us her gratitude, she prepared more high-class treats for us, which Haruhi had no qualms about devouring.

But of course, the happiest of us all was undoubtedly Sakanaka-san.

“You’re really something, Nagato-san. You managed to cure a disease that even professional vets know nothing about!”

“That’s to be expected of Yuki! She’s the most capable member of the SOS Brigade after all.”

Nagato said nothing, but instead continued to devour the treats. Haruhi, on the other hand, was busy talking non-stop.

“Yuki reads a lot, that’s why she’s so knowledgeable! To top it off, she’s also really good with the guitar, baking, and sports too!”

“It’s a good thing Nagato read about this disease from an old book of hers,”

Koizumi added as he elegantly sipped his tea.

“It seems that even modern science can’t prove why traditional folk medicine have such healing properties. Maybe old folk remedies aren’t such bad things after all.”

If you continue on like this, Koizumi, everyone will know that you’re nothing but a liar.

Having served their purpose, the candles and joss sticks were carelessly thrown back into the plastic bag. I had initially thought of taking Shamisen out from his cardboard box, but decided against it after considering the fact that he might leave a few claw marks on Sakanaka-san’s expensive furniture. He had begun meowing madly ever since he left Nagato’s arms, and was frantically scratching at the walls of the box. If he were to scratch any of Sakanaka-san’s furniture, I don’t think I’d be let off the hook with just a few stern warnings. Having this in mind, I ignored him, hoping that he would eventually go back to sleep.

To tell you the truth, the various equipment there were purely for aesthetic purposes only. The one who played the biggest role in this was Shamisen himself, but this was something only Nagato, Koizumi and I knew.

All Nagato had to do now was freeze the data lifeforms solid. That was all she needed to do.

We had originally planned for Nagato to just freeze the data lifeforms within both dogs. However, even though it was the simplest approach, it could also produce nasty side-effects. Even if Higuchi-san's Michael or Sakanaka-san's Rousseau one day died, the data lifeforms would still remain in their bodies. There was also a possibility that the data lifeforms would suddenly unfreeze and infect their hosts once again. That's why the best way we could think of was to transfer these lifeforms into another organic host and closely monitor them. Any organic host would do —- even Haruhi and me. However, Nagato had specifically requested that Shamisen be the host, because the lifeforms wouldn't be of any harm to Shamisen apparently. This was a cat that once had the ability to speak in human tongue, even though only for a short time. I don't think inserting a couple of cosmic lifeforms in him would do him any harm. Even if there might be nasty side effects, we wouldn't have to worry, since I would be the first one to notice. That's what we decided.

'Oh well,' I thought, 'I don't mind being a sacrificial goat for this operation too much,' as I stuffed another high-class treat into my mouth.

Even though this had begun as an unfortunate disaster for Sakanaka-san, the perpetrator behind the disaster had been transferred into my cat. Can someone here please feel sorry for me?

If Nagato's apartment doesn't forbid keeping cats as pets, maybe I should just give Shamisen to her. But if I really did that, I'm afraid I'd have to console my sister for a very long time. Plus, even I seem to have taken a liking to Shamisen. Oh just forget it. You live as long as Puss in Boots for me, you hear, Shamisen?

Seeing Sakanaka-san liven up once again, I think that even Shamisen wanted to open his mouth and say something.

As we left Sakanaka-san's house, Rousseau and Michael had already recovered with unbelievable speed, and were now as healthy as ever. Needless to say, Haruhi and Asahina-san cheered up too, as they took turns hugging the two little puppies, with big smiles on their faces of course.

Sakanaka-san's mother had prepared several gifts and treats for us to take home, Nagato's goody bag being the biggest of us all. But that's to be expected. After all, she did help out the most. As we were chatting earlier, we found out that Higuchi-san was a university student after all. She had also planned to give us something in return, but Haruhi politely refused.

“You don’t have to, honestly. This was something Sakanaka-san asked us to help her out with after all. I’m already satisfied with hugging Michael. Furthermore, the SOS Brigade isn’t some organization where we absolutely need money in order to survive. I think that seeing the both of you happy over JJ and Michael’s recovery is already the best reward. Isn’t that so, Yuki?”

Nagato didn’t say anything but merely nodded.

Koizumi was still as composed as ever, as he said to Sakanaka-san:

“If any other dogs are infected with the same disease as Rousseau, please do let us know. Even though the possibility of that happening is low, it’s still better to be safe than sorry.”

“Alright, I’ll ask around the next time I take Rousseau out for a walk,”

Sakanaka-san said, nodding earnestly.

“So, see you in school then!” Haruhi said as she waved to our classmate happily. As I followed her from behind, I suddenly thought:

If Haruhi and Sakanaka-san could be classmates again next year, that would be a good thing too.

Haruhi seems to have already forgotten all about the ‘spirits’ incident, as she chats merrily away with Asahina-san about dogs while we walk towards the station. That’s a good thing for me. At least I don’t have to think up an excuse for the whole incident.

When we reached the station, we decided to call it a day. Haruhi, Nagato and Asahina-san decided to get off the train one stop earlier, since it would be closer to their houses that way. Even though it was already noon, perhaps it was due to having consumed so many treats already, I didn’t want to enter a restaurant. Either that or I didn’t want to bring Shamisen into one. So with that, today’s SOS Brigade activities came to a close.

Koizumi and I passed through the automated gates, and exited the station.

Since the normally noisy girls of the SOS Brigade had already left, things seemed unusually quiet as the esper and I walked on the streets.

“What a day.”

Even though Koizumi said so while facing me, I had a feeling that he was actually saying it to himself.

“Since this was a pretty difficult problem to handle, we had no choice but to ask for Shamisen’s cooperation. Nagato-san is really something, eh? Come to think of it, something like this happened last year too, when Kimidori-san came to us for help. It was thanks to Nagato-san that

we were able to rescue the Computer Society President from those data lifeforms… It seems that Nagato is connected to each of our clients, don't you agree?

"What are you trying to say?"

"That Nagato-san has truly become an irreplaceable member of the SOS Brigade. However, this is merely my opinion. Compared to this, I think you're the one with something to say, am I right?"

Unfortunately, I'm not someone who loves to talk as much as you. The only thing I wanted to know was why kamadoumas and cosmic viruses alike were so attracted to our planet, as if it were a magnet or something. Maybe Nagato knows the answer for this. But nah, Nagato only came to Earth a few years ago to observe Haruhi—-

I suddenly froze on the spot.

Haruhi.

That couldn't possibly be the answer, could it? Because of a massive 'data flare', the Integrated Data Sentient Entity sent Nagato here. So does this mean that the kamadouma in the Computer Society president's case, as well as the cosmic viruses this time, were actually attracted to Haruhi? But that can't be so, can it? After all, Nagato said that the former had already come to Earth millions of years ago.

Now if Haruhi's powers could unconsciously break the boundaries of time, then that would be too extreme, wouldn't it? However, Asahina-san is a time traveler… Someone from the future who had crossed the boundaries of time and arrived in our time plane…

I began thinking seriously, like the time when the concept of time was messing around seriously in my head.

"Do you think it's all a coincidence?"

Be quiet, won't you? Koizumi resembled a waiter that was reciting his customer's order again and again. I had a feeling that I knew what he was going to say.

"Stop beating around the bush. I've got no time to be playing mind games here with you."

"Those cosmic life forms happened to land on this street near our houses, and even attached themselves onto a North High Student's dog. The said student then consulted the SOS Brigade, and had us take action… The truth was finally uncovered by Nagato, who in turn cleaned up the entire mess. For everything to happen so smoothly as I outlined to be a coincidence, the only time it'll ever happen is when it's the plot of a fiction novel."

Even though he had a point, this was one time where I couldn't just let laziness get the better of me and not make a retort. This doesn't mean that I'm on Haruhi's side, though.

“To hell with fiction probabilities. We do have two different cosmic entities appearing before us at the same time. What’s the probability of that happening? If you’re not going to label it coincidence, what else are you going to call it? Just like how you came up with your own detective script last winter, why can’t you let Nagato come up with her own script once in a while?”

“That should be impossible. I think the one that’s truly scripting everything is probably the Information Data Sentient Entity, or some other cosmic entity we haven’t met till now. And I can guarantee this is not something Suzumiya-san wishes for.”

What are you trying to say actually? Why are you still overworking your mind thinking about these pointless probabilities when it’s almost spring break now? Plus, everything’s over for the moment. Just let it rest.

“I’ve said it before, haven’t I? Suzumiya-san’s mind is gradually stabilizing. As happy as I am about it, there are also others who are undoubtedly disappointed with the current state of affairs. This is where the problem lies.”

I remained quiet, signaling for Koizumi to go on. Koizumi placed a finger on his lips, and said:

“There may even be some who think that things would be meaningless if Suzumiya-san continues to stabilize. Be it a data flare, a time quake, or a dimensional disruption, I think that there are people who are secretly manipulating things in the shadows, trying to evoke Suzumiya-san’s unbelievable powers.

I suddenly noticed that Koizumi’s smile had begun to look very odd, eerily resembling the one Asakura Ryouko had on her face the day she tried to kill me.

“That’s why, what I’m saying is, this incident may only be the prologue to something even more sinister.”

What are you talking about? If everything could be predicted, as you seem to suggest, someone would undoubtedly run a predicting service, and become the next Nostradamus.

Koizumi’s smile suddenly turned bitter.

“These cosmic entities suddenly landing on Earth, and right before our eyes too – I don’t think it’s something you can dismiss with a mere ‘coincidence’. You should know the truth better than anyone. These ‘aliens’ could actually be hidden right before us. There might be other cosmic intelligent lifeforms here on Earth aside from human interfaces.”

“Hmph.”

I didn’t want to mask my words any longer. You know Koizumi, it’s hard for me to accept what you’re saying after you’ve occasionally revealed to me that deceptive side of yours. If you want

to call Nagato a human interface, then do so right to her face. I don't really mind, seeing that it's the truth anyway, but:

"What I do mind are these 'other aliens' you just mentioned."

"There have been reports from within the 'Organization', that is why I know a little more than you do. Even though I don't know everything about them yet, I think it's sufficient to say that I know them quite well."

Koizumi's smile finally returned to normal.

"Let's just leave the other aliens to Nagato. I've decided that my priorities are to help the 'Organization' in combating its rivals. Similarly, if there are any rival time travelers, then I leave it to Asahina-san. I have a feeling that something is about to happen."

From Koizumi's expression, I could tell that he was serious, because his thoughts were exactly the same as mine. The only thing I disagreed with him was to leave the fighting to Asahina-san. That should be left to the other Asahina-san in the far future. I didn't worry about Nagato at all, since I was sure there was nothing that had greater willpower than she did. Oh and Koizumi, I hope you haven't forgotten the promise you made during the snow mountain incident.

"Of course I haven't. It's always been in my mind. But even if I do forget, I'm sure you'll be there to remind me, no?"

Koizumi laughed as he waved goodbye.

"Then, we'll save the chatting for another day."

"Ah, you're back Kyon-kun!"

When I reached home, I found my sister sprawled on my bed, happily reading my manga.

"Where did you take Shamy to?"

I didn't say anything, as I lifted Shamisen out of the box. Upon being released, the tri-colored cat immediately leapt onto my sister's back, and began walking up and down her spine, as if giving her a massage. My sister laughed as she waved her legs in midair.

"Kyon-kun, get Shamy off me, I can't stand it!"

I gently picked Shamisen off my sister's back, and placed him by her side. The fifth-and-soon-to-be sixth grader put down the manga in her hands, and proceeded to stroke Shamisen's back, while playfully tickling his nose.

“I smell something yummy —- What is it?”

I gave my sister the bag of treats Sakanaka-san’s mother had prepared, before going to pick up a thick, hardcover book on my desk.

About a week ago, after the end of the end of term exams, I had borrowed this book from Nagato. “Are there any interesting books here? Books that suit my current feelings?” I asked her. Nagato stood before the bookshelf for approximately 5 minutes before slowly picking the book that now lay before me. After reading about half of the book, I found out that it was a simple high school love story between a boy and girl. There were no traces of science fiction, nor were there any annoying deductions – just a normal story set in a normal world. However, because of various unexplainable reasons, I found this novel to be extremely suitable for me. That’s why I don’t think Nagato should become an astronomer or a vet. She should become a librarian instead.

I lay down on my bed, and started to pick up where I had previously left off. My sister had already brought the treats downstairs, and was probably busy finding something to drink.

I had no idea how much time had passed when —-

I suddenly noticed Shamisen scratching at the room door. He was probably signaling for me to open it up and let him out of the room. I usually left my room door half open for his convenience, but I suppose that my sister had accidentally closed it tight when she left my room earlier.

I inserted a bookmark into the novel I was reading, then got up to open the door for Shamisen. Shamisen immediately darted out of my room, and all of a sudden turned back and meowed at me. Is this his method of saying ‘thank you’?

However, when Shamisen began looking over my shoulder, I felt uncomfortable and too turned around.

All I saw was a corner of the ceiling. There was nothing else.

Shamisen’s round eyes were locked on the ceiling, before they slowly moved, finally landing on the wall outside my room. His eyes seemed to trace a path in the air, as if trying to tell me that something I couldn’t see had traveled from the ceiling to the outer wall.

“Hey.”

Even though I called out to Shamisen, he remained in that pose for a couple of seconds, before waving his tail in midair and strolling off. He was most probably headed to the kitchen to find something to eat. I left my door half closed, just wide enough for a cat to squeeze in, before giving Shamisen’s actions more thought. Animals would usually pay attention to things that humans would mostly ignore. Even small noises outside would sometimes distract them.

But what if Shamisen had seen something I couldn't just a moment ago? What if something invisible had attached itself to my ceiling, before slowly floating past my wall and out of my room?

—- A spirit?

—- I think it's better not to think about it.

What if some data lifeforms had arrived on Earth billions and billions of years ago, and chose humans as hosts instead of dogs? What if humans had a totally different reaction to them? Is this how the early humans gained their huge intelligence leaps?

If that were the case, then all Nagato's bosses needed to do to overcome their evolutionary dead end would to be to attach some of these lifeforms onto themselves. Of course, this would mean that they hadn't achieved evolution on their own, but rather through the help of some other worldly beings.

I wonder if the Information Data Sentient Entity had actually considered that possibility before. Even though it would be against the way of nature, maybe some cosmic entities had actually infected primates billions of years ago, which in turn caused them to develop their superior intelligence and evolve to the modern human now. If that was the case, then all queries regarding evolution would have been solved.

"What am I saying?"

I was already mumbling to myself. How could something as preposterous as that possibly happen? We should not think about things that exceed our brain capacity. I should just leave all these difficult scientific questions to Koizumi, just like how he wanted to leave aliens to Nagato. When the day that I finally understand what his sentences mean comes, I'll be sure to prepare a suitable counterattack.

Even if Koizumi was really occupied with his 'Organization', to the point that he couldn't spare me some time, I would still have others to turn to. The first person I would ask help from would be Tsuruya-san. If I manage to sway that cheery senpai to our side, I'm sure even the higher ups in the 'Organization' would be in a fix.

What should I do if such a situation ever arose, or what new situations would be brought into play, these I had never thought of before. You know what they say. 'We'll cross that bridge when we come to it'.

"… Ah forget it. Thinking's not my specialty, after all."

All I needed to do was to focus on being good old me. I was I, no more, no less.

Actually, if the time ever comes, I guess I'll contribute a little to thinking. But that's in the future. If you tell me to think any more before that happens, then I might just as well ignore you.

Just as I was in the middle of these random thoughts, my cell phone on the desk began to vibrate. Would it be from some unknown entity from an unknown time? As I picked my cell phone up, I saw it display the caller as ‘Haruhi’.

“What is it?”

“I forgot something important, Kyon!”

Cutting straight to the chase without bothering to even say ‘Hello’, that was exactly what Haruhi would do, all right.

“Even though I’m happy that JJ and Michael are all right, don’t you think the illness is kind of strange? I believe that they were scared stiff after seeing a spirit!”

Now do you understand why I’m so frustrated when it comes to thinking, Koizumi? Haruhi is one very annoying girl who likes to think about pointless stuff, and to top it off, share those thoughts with me.

“I think it’s due to that path that we took a week ago. According to my deductions, they may still be lurking there, floating around like wandering shadows.”

“Even though I’m not sure what kind of spirits they are, we should exorcise them as soon as possible!”

“So all members are to gather in front of the station again tomorrow! I’m going to take a photo of the spirits this time for sure!”

“How in the world are you planning to take pictures of spirits?”

“Since it’s impossible to take them in the morning, we’ll just have to take them at night! We’ll sniff out those spirit-infested areas, and take a couple of photos of them! If we’re lucky we may even manage to net 2 or 3 photos!”

Haruhi then proceeded to tell me the time and venue we were supposed to meet, and promptly hung up. It was as if she had never once considered whether I had any plans for Sunday. I assumed that a few seconds later, some other brigade member got the exact same call from her. I had a feeling that the next day’s ‘city-wide search for mysterious events’ would turn out to be a ‘close-encounter with midnight spirits’ event.

I put down my phone, glanced at one corner of the room, and was soon lost in thought.

Sakanaka-san’s ‘spirits’ case had finally been solved thanks to Nagato. I believe that spirits don’t exist in this world, and I’m sure Koizumi is of a similar opinion. The problem was that Haruhi did believe in them, and indeed hoped that they would come to pay her a visit every few hours. It seems that our brigade commander’s wishes have escalated from aliens, time travelers and espers to spirits now.

The task of mapping out ‘spirit hotspots’ I leave to Koizumi. Oh and if we do snap any pictures of spirits, Koizumi, do me a favor and whip up some scientific excuse on the spot. What was I going to be in charge of, you ask? That’s simple. I’ll be the one in charge of hugging Asahina-san if she ever screams out in the dark.

Walking about in the dark while mysteriously snapping photos, that seems mighty suspicious all right. I’m sure it would seem weird if we were to tell some bystander that we were trying to take a picture of a spirit that we didn’t even know what it might look like. And if we did really run into an emergency, all we needed to do was have Asahina-san put on a miko costume and start chanting out some Buddhist Scriptures. Maybe that will satisfy Haruhi’s ‘exorcising mission’.

But even if spirits really do exist in this world, I’m sure that we won’t bump into them simply by taking a walk in the dark. Plus, I don’t think Haruhi really wants to run into any spirits either.

After being with her for almost an entire year now, I’m sure that everyone understands, right? What that girl wishes for is not spirits, but rather the process of trying to find them together with everyone.

Then, what do I think about it, you ask?

“Oh well, let’s just treat it as a night outing.”

I looked at the ceiling Shamisen was looking at not long ago while talking to myself. After that, I continued reading my book, which was set in a world that was much more normal than the one I was currently living in now. Even so, I didn’t envy that normal world one bit, or at least that’s what the current me thinks now.

Author's Notes

About books.

A few days ago, for no particular reason, I raided the cardboard box that holds those sorted junks. Inside of them are the books that I have read in the past.

By the way, I don't have the habit of disposing items easily. That said, I don't have a lot of boxes filed away since I tend to think about what I want before I buy. Although these books have been around for close to a decade, looking at them feels like looking at myself of the past, and it gives me a feeling of saying that "ahh, it's alright".

Looking at these books, I can't help but to think of how my thought pattern is shaped by having read all of them. Of course I would be unable to recall the fine details in the volumes but the bits and pieces of memory of that reading process are deeply engrained in my head are still setting right now.

Time is of foremost importance. While you read you would be moved and impacted in ways hard to express. However, if I am to read the books again, the impacts and emotions would definitely be different from those days.

It can be said that the books I have read are the predecessors to everything that I have written. I can't help to conclude that should I lack one of those books this epilogue might not exist.

With my thoughts trailing to this point, I closed the cardboard boxes once more being utterly touched as I make up my mind to find some time and give those books another read and put the boxes away. Additionally I hope that perhaps I can reap more from the books that I read henceforth.

Cats

I am afraid of the cold. I have to have a winter jacket on for most of the year. Due to this I have been the butt of great many jokes. However, I would answer with: "I might have been a cat in my past lives". Let's not discuss if reincarnation is real or not for now. I just think from time to time that if my previous incarnation was a cat, would cat not have previous incarnation? If a cat was once a polar bear, then would the cat be afraid of the heat or of the cold? If the cat becomes a penguin next what then? Is reincarnation specific to human? Doesn't seem to be that way, give that there used to be a television show called*Astrologer of Pet's Previous Lives* which did pretty well. But I would think that I could do the same as well!

I spent my days thinking of such trivial things.

Editor in Chief★Straight Ahead!

1000 What would happen if SOS Brigade does an activity around the Literary club? I thought about that since the beginning. As such, I have written some Nagato one-shot and a piece called ‘’Digest • Literary Club Activity’’. Although I remember having written such things, I have forgotten where on the hard drive they have gone, so it took awhile to hunt them down.

The earliest drafts also include such things as *Student Union Finally on the Move*, *Discuss • Computing Club• Despondence*, *Haruhi's Disappearance*, *Sporting Match*, which I kind of miss. Although I have pen several other works, but since I find them either reveal too much story ahead or lacking meaning, I had them set aside. They now sit at a corner in my hard drive. From day to day I have been clicking about with my mouse, weeding through all the files trying to see if I can make a new discovery. If you're willing feel free to help.

Wandering Shadow

It has always been worrisome whenever I have to come up with a title for the book or even just the subtitles. When I just can't stand it anymore I simply jot down some Katakana and call it at that. Originally this title was temporary called *Drifting Shadow* (originally 彷徨う影) which I translated into English, nothing special with this.

Come to think of it, as with the case of *Melancholy of Suzumiya Haruhi*, I didn't bother to give it a second thought and just took ten seconds to makeup the title. Subsequently the names are by no means eloquent. I tend to start writing without thinking about the topic only to go back when I am done. I know thought that I lack talent in that department so I would simply give the piece just anything I can think of. Who is willing to do the work for me next time?

The combination of a series of headings forms this absent-minded work, and it already is at its eighth volume. That of course is due to the massive efforts of those involved with the production and circulation and most importantly, the continuous support from the broad reader base. With my thanks to all that that have been helping and supporting me of the releases of media other than novels, see you again.

—Tanigawa Nagaru

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